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Ministerial Statement

Higher Education: Widening Participation

Dr Farry (The Minister for Employment and Learning): Mr Speaker, thank you for this opportunity to make a statement to the Assembly on fair access to higher education in Northern Ireland. In particular, I want to advise Members of the launch of Access to Success, the new integrated regional strategy for widening participation in higher education.

Widening participation in higher education by students from the sections of society that are currently under-represented, in particular students from disadvantaged backgrounds and those with disabilities and learning difficulties, is one of my Department's key strategic goals. My Department's vision for widening participation is that any qualified individual in Northern Ireland should be able to gain access to higher education that is right for them, irrespective of their personal or social background. Students should enter higher education on the basis of their ability to learn, not their ability to pay.

At almost 50%, Northern Ireland now has the highest participation rate of any area of the United Kingdom. In addition, we also have the best record in the UK of attracting students from low-income backgrounds into higher education. We have, therefore, already been considerably successful in achieving our objectives of raising the motivation, aspirations and performance of students who otherwise may not have considered going into higher education. I take this opportunity to congratulate our universities, further education colleges and schools on their work in this vital area. Nevertheless, there remain some stubborn pockets of under-representation, including those from socio-economic classification groups 5 to 7 and from low-participation/high-deprivation areas, and that is why my Department has been leading on the development of a new integrated regional strategy for widening participation in higher education in Northern Ireland. The widening participation strategy seeks to assist individuals with the greatest need by targeting resources on where they will have the greatest effect and impact, with the focus kept firmly on the most able but least likely. Specifically, the strategy will target individuals from socio-economic classification groups 5 to 7; students with a disability, whether physical, sensory and/or learning; individuals from low-participation neighbourhoods — that is, areas of high deprivation; and young Protestant males from areas of high deprivation.

There are many benefits that graduates, as individuals, and society generally may derive from higher education. Research studies show that participation in higher education may lead not only to more rewarding jobs with higher pay but to a range of personal benefits, including a higher sense of well-being and personal confidence. Research has also shown the direct correlation between higher-level qualifications and skills and higher levels of employability. Higher education is also about much more than just getting a degree. It is also about personal fulfilment, forging new friendships and developing skills in preparation for the rest of one's adult life. Above all, it is about investing in the future.

Access to Success recognises higher education as more than the traditional three- or four-year primary degree. It includes all qualifications beyond level 4, including intermediate-level qualifications, in which Northern Ireland currently has recognised skills shortages, as identified in my Department's skills strategy, Success through Skills. The skills strategy considers the current skills base and identifies the skills that we are likely to need in the future to grow the Northern Ireland economy. It forecasts that, by 2020, there is likely to be increased demand for higher-level skills: science, technology, engineering and mathematic (STEM) skills; management and leadership skills; the upskilling of the current workforce; and attracting moderate levels of appropriately skilled people to Northern Ireland. Access to Success will, therefore, seek to increase the number of learners studying full time or part time for a foundation degree to 2,500 in 2015 from a baseline of 1,132 in 2010. Foundation degrees are delivered by the further education regional colleges and offer a close-to-home opportunity for people who face travel barriers to participation in higher education. I therefore recognise the importance of ensuring that we continue to provide all our people with the opportunity to avail themselves of the benefits of higher education. In that context, last September, the Executive and I decided to freeze tuition fee levels for local students at local institutions and to sustain the level of funding of the higher education sector. Widening participation in higher education is vital for achieving economic competitiveness as well as social justice. It is also crucial to the economy that we harness the talents of all our people. To achieve the very highest standards, our higher education institutions must have access to the very best pools of talent. If we are to position ourselves in the global economy and to make this country world-class, we must encourage participation from people who would not have traditionally benefited from higher education.

In 2010, my Department established a higher education widening participation regional strategy group and four expert working groups comprising relevant experts from education, the public and private sectors and other government Departments to consider the issues involved and to begin to outline a new approach. In 2011, my Department published a public consultation document based on the findings of the regional strategy group to ensure that as many views as possible were considered in the development of the widening participation strategy. I thank everyone who participated in the steering group and in the expert working groups and everyone who gave evidence to those groups or responded to the formal public consultation. Access to Success, therefore, represents the first fully integrated regional approach to addressing this issue. The overall thrust of the new strategy will be to focus, as much as possible, on individual students. The twin keys to the strategy are integration and regionality. It is about getting all our higher education providers to work to common definitions and measures for widening participation, while developing their own unique approach within a common framework. The strategy will be delivered through 11 key actions that support the five key themes that underpin the vision. Those themes are understanding the demand-side needs; raising aspiration and attainment; enhancing recruitment and selection; improving the quality and relevance of support for retention and progression; and streamlining the structures for involvement and investment.

I will now briefly outline a number of the key actions. To understand the demand-side needs, my Department will work closely with higher education providers to identify more clearly at individual level, where possible, the most disadvantaged students applying to higher education. That will help to increase our understanding of the patterns of application and acceptance and help to direct and focus institutional efforts to support wider participation. The identification system developed should be able to assess an individual's need for support and recommend the level and type of assistance required. There is evidence that personal circumstances and background can have a very significant effect on participation in higher education. To put it another way, almost three times as many young people with parents in professional positions will attend university as young people whose parents are in lower-paid occupations. Research shows that a lack of role models in a young person's life can lead to them never even considering that higher education could be a realistic option for them. We need to find ways to instil confidence in those young people to help them to raise their personal aspirations and to help them to see that university is as relevant to them as to anyone else. To raise aspiration and attainment, my Department, working in conjunction with higher education providers, will develop and implement a centralised campaign to raise awareness of the potential value and accessibility of higher education to all in the community. That programme will be augmented by community outreach programmes and should help to reduce early community barriers to participation.

Let me be clear that my vision for widening participation does not include quotas or the lowering of academic standards; rather, my vision of widening participation is about raising aspirations, challenging stereotypes and empowering those who are most able but least likely to enter our universities. Widening participation in higher education is not about dumbing down. If we are to expect the next generation to compete in the world, there can be no reduction in academic standards; rather, we need to find ways to raise attainment levels across the entire education system to ensure that Northern Ireland has a ready supply of suitably qualified young people equipped to take advantage of higher education. Therefore, my Department will make funding available to expand the range of aspiration- and attainment-raising programmes at school and college, in the community and the workplace. All institutions offering higher education courses will be encouraged to offer community outreach programmes designed to raise the educational attainment levels of students to enable entry to higher education. Outreach activity should be undertaken not only with local schools and colleges in under-represented areas, but with adult learners in the workplace and in local communities. The outreach programmes will be overtly linked to the single awareness-raising programme and must incorporate an attainment-raising element.

In Northern Ireland, the higher education institutions are frequently asked to take into account exceptional circumstances when considering applications to higher education courses and, on occasions, may adjust their offer criteria if the circumstances of the individual applicant are considered to be sufficiently extraordinary. However, there are two main problems with that process: the systems are not standardised and not publicised, thereby potentially increasing unfairness between those who have the presence of mind to make the appeal and those, perhaps less familiar with higher education, who do not. Therefore, to enhance recruitment and selection, my Department will encourage the higher education institutions to develop and pilot regional standardised exceptional application procedures for the most disadvantaged applicants. To maintain a close targeting of the most able but least likely, eligibility criteria should be strict and eliminate all but the most disadvantaged applicants. To benefit from the programme, an applicant should be clearly identifiable as a person of multiple

disadvantage, meet the minimum entry requirements for the relevant course and provide satisfactory evidence of how their disadvantage or disability has negatively affected educational attainment.

10.45 am

Increasing the number of people from under-represented sections of society will not be enough. Having got them there, we will need to ensure that they have adequate support, direct and indirect, that is appropriate to their needs and will give them the best chance to complete their studies and emerge with the all-important qualification at the end. The dropout rate in higher education has become a specific area of concern in recent years. The issue is a particularly complex one, and research has shown that many factors may impact on dropout, including finance, gender, educational background and, of course, the subject being studied. My Department will seek to improve retention and progression rates in higher education among students from disadvantaged backgrounds. My Department will continue to recognise the additional costs associated with the recruitment and retention of students from disadvantaged backgrounds through the payment of premium funding based on the number of identified widening participation students attending the relevant institution. Higher education providers will be expected to provide supplementary support systems for those students as they enter into and progress through higher education. That support will be tailored to individual needs and based on identified multiple disadvantages. The emphasis must be on value for money in each support initiative, rather than large cash bursaries for individuals. Targeted bursaries are a legitimate way to pursue fair access, but they should be payable only to students on the lowest household income levels.

Student loans represent a significant cost to the Northern Ireland Budget. The focus should be on fee waivers and other forms of direct support, as those would lower the cost to the student and the public purse and can be much more effective than bursaries. In addition, community-based scholarship programmes have the potential to help break down community barriers to participation in higher education and improve university and community liaison. My Department will work with motivated communities to help build capacity at local level, identify private sector bodies as potential sponsors and develop an operational model for delivery, including application, adjudication and selection criteria.

The development of the widening participation strategy has been conducted in tandem with the development of the higher education strategy and policies on tuition fees and student support. Care has been taken to ensure that the consultation document is aligned with other departmental strategy approaches, such as Success through Skills, FE Means Business and the Executive's economic and social development strategies.

The starting point for institutional expenditure on widening participation from 2012 onwards will be the current levels of expenditure. Departmental funding will be directly linked to widening participation activities and achievements. Institutions must ensure that their widening access and participation support is clearly set out and publicly available and that students are advised of that support for the duration of their course before they begin their studies. The overall thrust of the widening participation strategy will be to focus, as much as possible, on individual students. Universities will be expected to reduce blanket bursary programmes in favour of more tailored support for targeted individuals. The recording and reporting infrastructures around widening participation will be simplified but will also be expanded to cover all funded institutions offering higher education courses, including the further education colleges. I propose to rationalise the existing requirement for higher education institutions to submit annual access agreements and separate strategic assessments to the Department to a single document that will outline the institution's widening participation strategy and its achievements against specified targets. Since the fees regime in Northern Ireland has not changed, there is no proposal to change the current sanctions for non-compliance. However, my Department will continue to monitor the arrangements in Great Britain and in the Republic of Ireland to ensure that neither our institutions nor our students are disadvantaged in any way. It is envisaged that the projects would phase in the necessary changes to existing widening participation structures between 2012 and the end of March 2015.

Today is about retaining Northern Ireland's commitment to widening participation in higher education, raising aspirations and promoting opportunity. I trust that the House will join me in that undertaking.

Mr B McCrea (The Chairperson of the Committee for Employment and Learning): The Speaker will appreciate that this is a comprehensive statement by the Minister; it is some five pages in length.

The Minister will be approaching the Committee tomorrow, and I have no doubt that members will wish to bring up some of the issues in detail. However, there are a number of points on which the Minister might like to expand.

Page 1 of the statement states that, specifically, the strategy will target young Protestant males in areas of high deprivation. The Minister also mentions students with a disability and others. Can the Minister tell us the current baseline figures for participation in the areas that are being specifically targeted. What does the Minister anticipate the participation level will be as a result of his strategy? I note that, towards the end of his statement, he proposes to revamp the reporting structure in all of this. I am interested to know how we are planning to do that.

My second point — I will only make two points, Mr Speaker, because I know that others will wish to speak — is that it seems to me that the crux of all of this about participation is environmental and family support. I think the Committee would be interested to know, Minister, how we intend to get to individuals and, specifically, to their parents and people in their peer group to encourage them to take forward education. I do not think that it is enough to merely say that, aspirationally, we want to do this; the Committee would be interested in how, specifically, you plan to reach those people.

Dr Farry: I thank the Chair of the Committee. We will certainly be happy to explore this tomorrow, and my officials will be happy to attend the Committee in the future for even more detailed scrutiny of the new strategy. The Chair raised three issues, not two, but I will endeavour to address all three.

The first point relates to the specific areas that we seek to work with. The point that I want to stress is that, first, we have to talk about multiple disadvantage. If we talk about people from areas of deprivation or people with disabilities etc, we are, very quickly, talking about 70% of the population of Northern Ireland. If we are talking in those terms, we will not have a targeted strategy. We are, therefore, talking about people who will tick a number of boxes. Within that, there are particular pockets that we need to address. Let me take the issue of young Protestant males from the socio-economic groups 5 to 7. At present, 3.7% of enrolments in 2008-09, which are the most recent figures I have available, come from that cohort of society. That is clearly a sign of considerable under-representation. We are not setting formal targets for the universities in that regard, because we have to respect that they are autonomous bodies will base their decisions on admission upon attainment. However, be in no doubt: we have to drive up those levels of engagement and ensure that we give everyone in society a fair opportunity to access higher education. We will all benefit from that.

I will jump ahead to the third question; I think this goes to the crux of the matter. This is a strategy that has been approved by the Executive. It is cross-cutting. Virtually all the actions directly in the strategy pertain to my Department, but, of course, that will work only as part of an overall initiative from the Executive to address issues regarding deprivation and lack of opportunity in Northern Ireland. The Executive now have the framework in the Delivering Social Change agenda, and this very much reinforces that. Obviously, there is work to be done by the health sector in addressing health inequalities. There is also work to be done with regard to employment, and that is something to which my Department can contribute by providing people with proper jobs and incomes. Clearly, there is also a major task for the education system to drive up levels of attainment and encourage people to think of higher education.

The final point that I will make about how this all operates is that each university is required to produce an access agreement. Any university in the UK, in return for the ability to charge tuition fees that — I speak from memory — are above about £1,300, is required to produce an annual access agreement. Those agreements have to be approved by my Department, and those are the means by which we will police it and ensure that universities will deliver on those very important commitments.

Mr Buchanan: Mr Speaker, if you will give me the latitude, I have two issues to mention. I welcome the statement. As the Chair of the Committee said, it is comprehensive. I note the Department's key strategic goals, which are to target and focus on students from disadvantaged backgrounds, those with disabilities, those with learning difficulties, those from under-represented areas, those who have not traditionally benefited from higher education and those who suffer from multiple disadvantages, but one thing that is missing from the statement if we want to see those key objectives delivered is the whole issue of community —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to come to his question.

Mr Buchanan: — of community transport. That is a big issue in rural areas. While we have the programmes here, we do not have the transport available. What discussions has the Minister had with other Departments to ensure that the proper community transport is in place to get these objectives delivered? I have one other very brief issue, and that is on —

Mr Speaker: Order. I have given the Member quite a bit of latitude.

Mr Buchanan: OK, Speaker. Thank you.

Dr Farry: The Member can hold that thought until tomorrow morning, and I look forward to his second question then.

Obviously, community transport is an area that the Department for Regional Development can help us to deliver, and we are happy to take such discussions forward as part of the implementation of the strategy. However, the point that I will particularly stress to the Member at this stage is that we recognise that access and ease of access to higher education is an issue. That is why we are keen to develop higher education within the further education sector, and we have increased the number of places in recent months in that regard. We also have major plans for significant increases in the provision of foundation degrees, which can also be taken forward through the FE sector. The Member may also recall that in the higher education strategy we talked about trying to find a local point from which university services could be delivered as a pilot. That is likely to be taken forward in the next number of years, and I am sure that the Member will make a bid for the south-west and west of Northern Ireland in that regard.

Mr McElduff: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I welcome the statement. It is a hugely important issue. I have two points. Students from the North not being able to gain admission to universities in the South because A levels are disregarded is a huge issue, and something needed to be said in the statement about that. I have e-mails from students who are trying to get into universities in Dublin, but the CAO will not accept the additional points.

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to come to his question.

Mr McElduff: Will the Minister make a commitment to tackle that issue in a thorough way? Secondly, there are rural communities and areas west of the Bann that are furthest from a university presence, such as Omagh and Enniskillen. Can I get an assurance that there will be a greater university presence in the regional college there?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr McElduff for his questions. We are acutely aware of the issue about the recognition of qualifications in the South of the island. My colleague John O'Dowd and I have raised the issue with Ruairi Quinn, the Minister for Education and Skills in the Republic. John O'Dowd is leading on that issue on our behalf, and I am keeping a close eye on it. I believe that we are making some progress in that regard, though we have not got the issue over the line just yet.

Access in rural areas was mentioned, and Mr McElduff made points to reinforce Mr Buchanan's points. We are very much committed to rural access.

That is why we are keen to expand higher education within further education and why we are doing a pilot whereby one of the universities delivers one of its services in a different part of Northern Ireland. Obviously, the south-west, including the area that the Member represents, will be a very clear candidate for that.

11.00 am

Mr P Ramsey: I welcome the Minister's statement. Like him, I thank the steering group for its work. One area that I discussed with the group was regional disparity. Minister, given that your focus has clearly been on empowering those who are able but least likely to access higher education, how do you propose to do that in my constituency, when Magee is turning away so many young people from low-income families who cannot afford to send their children away to study?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Ramsey for his question. That is a common theme that we have been discussing over the past number of months. There is considerable interest in applying to universities in Northern

Ireland. Some people who apply elsewhere do so by choice, but sometimes they do so because they cannot get a place in Northern Ireland. We have a fixed number of places, so we have to have a financial control on those places to ensure that we can survive within our budgets. However, the Member will be aware that, last year, we secured additional places at local universities as part of the tuition fee settlement, and that is now being rolled out.

The overall level of applications from Northern Ireland students to universities here has, essentially, remained constant. I think that we have managed to achieve that because we took the decision to freeze fees. We have seen a significant drop in the number of applications to universities elsewhere in the UK. Similarly, there has been a drop in applications throughout the UK. I have no doubt that that is a reflection of the impact of tuition fees and of the fact that students are thinking about their future.

We will re-examine the issue of places in Northern Ireland after we have gained sufficient evidence. At the moment, we have consistency in the level of applications, but if pressure is demonstrated over a number of years, I have the ability to go back to the Executive to seek additional places. Those places will be allocated to universities, which will make their own decisions.

Obviously, the University of Ulster has a major commitment to the expansion of Magee. Personally, I would be delighted to see Magee expand. I understand the importance of Magee to the economy in the north-west. However, we have to take decisions that are based primarily on the interests of the higher education system in Northern Ireland. I welcome any benefits to the north-west, but those will be the outworkings of other decisions that we take.

Mr Lyttle: I welcome the announcement of the strategy and the commitment that the Minister is showing to addressing the barriers to access to higher education for people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Minister, how important is consistently high-quality careers guidance in all our schools to widening participation in higher education? What work is his Department and the Department of Education doing to ensure that careers guidance for all young people is of the highest possible quality?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Lyttle for his question. Careers are dealt with jointly by my Department and the Department of Education. Schools have their own careers teachers. However, my Department also provides a Careers Service across Northern Ireland that is available in jobs and benefits offices and at a number of dedicated sites. We also seek to go into schools. I am disappointed that although we have access to about 99% of schools, we do not yet have access to 100% of them. It is important that young people think about their futures at an early stage. Most of the time, careers guidance starts at 16, but there may be a case for expanding it to those aged 14.

A review of careers policy is very much on my agenda, and I have spoken to the Education Minister, John O'Dowd, about it. The review is scheduled for 2014, but we will see whether we can bring that forward somewhat. I also am aware that the Committee for Employment and Learning is undertaking a inquiry into careers. I very much welcome that and believe that it will reinforce the work that my Department does in due course. It will be an important contribution to emerging policy on the future development of careers.

Mr Douglas: I thank the Minister for his statement. In it, he says:

"The starting point for institutional expenditure on widening participation from 2012 onwards will be the current levels of expenditure."

Obviously, therefore, no new money is being announced today. What are the Minister's plans to link with other Departments to try to realise the strategy? I am thinking of the likes of the Office of the First Minister and deputy First Minister, which manages the social investment fund, and the Department for Social Development.

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Douglas for his question, which reflects the era that we are in. We are in a very tight public expenditure environment. Nevertheless, a considerable amount of money is being spent on widening participation. To put that in some context; my Department spends around £2.3 million annually to support universities in that regard. That includes funding of £1.3 million that goes directly to the institutions. There is further funding of around £500,000 for the Step-Up campaign, which the University of Ulster runs in conjunction with schools. There is another £200,000 for the Discovering

Queen's project. There is also funding for widening access, which supports people in institutions who need such support. Collectively, that funding amounts to around £2.3 million. On top of that, the universities spend over £12 million on widening participation. Therefore, it is a major element of all our budgets. Those levels of investment will certainly be maintained into the future.

We seek to redirect existing funding to ensure that we use the money most efficiently and effectively. In particular, I want to draw attention to points that I made about shifting away from the broad, wide use of bursaries, which sometimes may have a bit of a dead-weight effect and may not have the same impact as other measures. We are trying to shift the budget more towards targeted bursaries, greater use of fee waivers and greater expenditure on community-outreach activities.

Of course, we are very willing to work with other Departments. Obviously, the Department of Education is a key partner. Again, we will look at any other additional funding mechanisms that are available to allow us to expand what we are doing.

Mr Ó hOisín: Cuirim fáilte roimh an ráiteas. I welcome the Minister's statement. A Cheann Comhairle, I understand that, in 2012, some 36,000 young people left school without GCSEs. Given that the Minister said in his statement that he intends to work with local communities, can he elaborate on that and explain the modalities of it? Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle.

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. It is worth stressing that there is a two-tier education system in Northern Ireland. At times, it produces young people with some of the best results anywhere in these islands, and that is a source of celebration. However, the system often fails many young people. Too many young people emerge from education with little or no qualifications. The Department of Education has ambitious targets for raising the percentage of young people who achieve grades A to C in at least five GCSEs. I believe that 70% is the target that we want to achieve. For those who slip out, there are other programmes. In particular, there is the NEETs — not in education, employment or training — strategy, which we published in June.

The direct action that we are taking through this strategy is much more focused on community outreach. It involves the universities going out and working with schools and communities. Rather than have a fragmented system in which different people do different bits and perhaps do not co-ordinate with one another, we are trying to bring the strategy under a unified campaign — a central, branded campaign on widening participation — and are talking to and trying to encourage people to think about higher education and their future careers.

Mr Kinahan: I also thank the Minister for his comprehensive statement. There is much in it that is great to see. However, I long to see action on its specific details. I want to see Northern Ireland back leading the world with its skills and expertise. We know, for example, that €60 billion is being targeted at the agenda for new skills and jobs and other strategies. How does the Minister specifically see that fitting into his skills strategy?

Mr Speaker: I urge the Member to come to his question.

Mr Kinahan: I am just getting there, Mr Speaker. How does the Minister see that European spend fitting into his skills strategy and the widening of participation?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question, and I will certainly echo the comments that he makes about the importance of skills to the future of the Northern Ireland economy. We have a clearly identifiable need for an increase in higher-level skills through to 2020, as identified in the skills strategy. We know what the future labour market needs of this society are going to be, and it is important that we encourage people to upskill across a very broad front, but in particular within the STEM — science, technology, engineering and mathematics — subjects, as, sometimes, they are most relevant to some of the growth sectors.

We are already investing heavily in skills in Northern Ireland but, of course, we are always very open to any new sources of funding. We already benefit from the European social fund, and a large element of that goes into supporting employability projects. European moneys are already going into developing skills in Northern Ireland. I have certainly sought, in discussions with the European Commission, to see whether any additional moneys are available during this current round of the European Union budget, although that is, perhaps, unlikely. We await with great interest the next European Union budget, which it is set to strike beyond 2014.

Mr Molloy: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his statement and congratulate him on the development of the further education colleges. However, has he any plans to ensure that the practical shop-floor training that engages people for work can be brought forward, something along the lines of the former Government training centres? I know, particularly responding to neighbourhood renewal areas and areas of high deprivation, that those skills are very important to allow people to take up the jobs that are being advertised, particularly in engineering.

Dr Farry: Again, I thank the Member for his question. He touches on a number of themes. First of all, in-work training is critical, and I draw the attention of the Member to the employer engagement plan that we published last March in relation to the skills strategy. We talk about employers engaging more with my Department through the skills solution service to help them with their training needs, and also the importance of giving accredited qualifications and training to people already in work. It is fair to say that if we look into the future, 10 years from now, almost 80% of the workforce of a decade ahead are already in the workplace. So, we must not forget them, but ensure that we continue to invest in those skills.

We are also very keen to work at a community level, and the Member will be aware that we have just confirmed the mainstreaming of the learner access and engagement programme, and procurement for the programme will be rolled out over the next number of months.

Finally, the Member talked about engineering skills. I am acutely aware of some of the concerns raised by that sector, and that is why we have created an engineering skills working group, which will have its first meeting next week. I will be chairing that group to ensure that we address and plan for the future of what is a very important sector for a large part of Northern Ireland.

Mr Byrne: I, too, welcome the statement but I have to say, Minister, that I am disappointed by the content of the statement. In five pages of text, only one sentence relates to facts. I am disappointed that you are only increasing foundation degree posts in further education colleges from 1,132 in 2010 to 2,500 in 2015. Why are you so low in your expectations?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Byrne for his question. I am sorry to disappoint him — in that a 100% increase is disappointing over a three-year period — but we will ever reach for the stars in that regard. The comprehensive strategy, which contains 50 pages of facts and full details of all the action points, is now available on the Department's website, and I certainly encourage Mr Byrne to have a very good read of that in a few hours' time.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, thank the Minister for his statement. Many of the young people he wants to target for a move into further education will often have studied BTEC diplomas, etc, instead of A levels. UCAS already publishes equivalency tables for those qualifications to inform entrance criteria, but some of the universities do not take those into consideration. How does the Minister propose to deal with that?

11.15 am

Dr Farry: Universities are encouraged to look at non-traditional routes for qualifications. It is important that everyone is given fair access and it is important to recognise that not everyone does A levels. Often, people from some of the more disadvantaged sections of society are more likely to have had a non-traditional educational route. That theme is very much central to the strategy.

Mr Dallat: I also welcome the Minister's statement. I am sure that the Minister would agree with me that one of the greatest achievements in recent years was the performance of our further education colleges in reaching out to people who were failed by the education system. How does the Minister plan to create a renaissance that will put the further education colleges right back to centre stage and doing the work that they historically did extremely well?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Dallat for his comments. He raised a very important point. The FE sector is incredibly flexible and very broad in the areas that it addresses. That ranges from essential skills in literacy, numeracy and ICT, through to foundation degrees, which are higher level qualifications in their own right and which are often very much tailored to the specific needs of employers. FE colleges

are also the main deliverers of vocational education and are often the main partners in the provision of vocational training for apprentices. Colleges are absolutely central to the Northern Ireland economy.

One of the other pieces of work that I intend to take forward over the coming months is to look again at the further education sector in Northern Ireland. The governing document for the sector, 'FE Means Business', dates back to 2004, so it is time that we had a fresh look at that. I do not anticipate that the underlying vision and role of the FE sector as a key component of the economy will fundamentally change. However, I think that we need to look again at how the sector can best contribute to the economy and education in Northern Ireland in the current context.

Mr Rogers: Thanks to the Minister for his statement. Many of those who avail themselves of foundation degrees have childcare responsibilities; many are young mothers. I have met many of them who, as well as having childcare responsibilities, have to work at night to keep the bread on the table. Will the Minister elaborate on the bursary scheme and the income threshold for the availability of bursaries?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his comments. There are probably two things that I want to stress. First, the Member's comments about childcare in the context of foundation degrees probably lend themselves to a broader point about the importance of the FE sector and, in relation to this statement, higher education providers working very closely with students once they are through the door. It is not just about how we get people to apply and get accepted to universities but how we work to retain them. That involves the universities putting in place new programmes that are very much tailored to the individual needs of students, monitoring the attendance of those who come from any of the widening participation categories and trying to intervene if anyone is at particular risk. It is also about showing flexibility to those who have very particular personal circumstances.

It is up to the universities rather than my Department to set the levels of bursaries. Each year, the universities provide access agreements that set out all they intend to do and how they intend to spend their budgets to support students. However, the direction of travel that we want to encourage is a move away from blanket bursaries towards more targeted bursaries, fee waivers and an increased spend on community outreach. We are encouraging the higher education providers to shift the balance of their budgets.

Mr Allister: The Minister rightly identifies Protestant young men from disadvantaged backgrounds as a target group. It is delivery for that group that I am interested in. The Minister seems sympathetic to targeted bursaries, which do seem to me to be the most obvious incentive. Could he help us by telling us what his ambition is as to the number of targeted bursaries that will be available for that particular sector? Without just telling us that it is a matter for the universities, will he tell us what his ambition is as Minister for that group in terms of targeted bursaries?

Dr Farry: I thank Mr Allister for his question. I hate to disappoint him by saying that the issue of specific numbers is one for the universities, but that is the simple fact of the matter. Let me respond in this way: to be very clear, I want to drive up levels of attainment and opportunity right across every section of society, and that includes young Protestant males, alongside everyone else. Institutions will always base their entry decisions on the qualifications of students and, indeed, sometimes their potential. We cannot interfere with that proper, independent process. However, if we get the strategy right and invest properly, and, indeed, if government works in a joined-up manner, we will be investing in all sections of society and, in the very near future, we should see the application and acceptance levels from that particular cohort and others increasing.

Mr D McIlveen: I thank the Minister for his statement and apologise for missing the start of it. Minister, you will obviously be aware that other countries that have widened higher education participation have found themselves in a position of having astrophysicists almost brushing the streets. Will you assure the House about the steps you are going to take to ensure that academia and the economy do not become disjointed? For example, are you going to be working with the Minister of Enterprise, Trade and Investment to ensure that the right students are coming out with the right skills to drive our economy forward?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for his question. Obviously, everything that we are doing is geared towards the future economic needs of society. We have a difficult economic situation at present. The message that I am very keen to get out to young people in particular is that although they may look at a figure of 20% youth unemployment and despair, if they break those figures down and look at people

with degrees or other higher-level qualifications, they will see that the unemployment figure is below 10%. Already, people can see that a major bonus for employability prospects is to be found in investing in training and education. Of course, an unemployment level in the high single figures is itself a major problem, and that is a reflection of the wider economy. There is also a related problem at times; people who have a degree may, at present, be in a job for which they do not technically need a degree. That is a problem that we call underemployment. To a certain extent, that is a reflection of some skills mismatches, but it is also a reflection of the underlying economic situation.

I draw the Member's attention again to the skills strategy for Northern Ireland. It has a very clear message that we need more and more people with higher-level qualifications across a wide range of areas, in particular qualifications in STEM subjects. Independently produced reports from economists are telling us very clearly that that is what we need.

Last June, I published a report into the potential skills needs of the Northern Ireland economy in the context of a lower level of corporation tax. I know that that is something that we are working hard on with the new Secretary of State. Again, that reinforces the message of the skills strategy and, indeed, suggests that the skills needs of the Northern Ireland economy will accelerate in the context of that lower rate of corporation tax. All the indicators are showing us that, notwithstanding the current economic difficulties, we will need more and more people with higher-level skills in the future. Our main competitors are also investing in skills. This is a race to the top, not a race to the bottom.

Mrs Overend: I thank the Minister for his statement. I just want to tease out a little bit more about the bursaries and the fee waiver scheme. Will the Minister explain how the fee waivers will be targeted and how that will lower the cost to the public purse?

Dr Farry: I thank the Member for her question. General bursaries may not be targeting the people who are most in need of support to attend higher education. Also, the nature of the funding may not necessarily be addressed purely at educational costs. Targeted bursaries, on the other hand, will hone in on the students who, potentially, best and most need the financial support. When we talk about moving towards fee waivers, that support is very much aimed at addressing the direct costs that students must spend money on in paying their tuition fees and other student support costs. Where a fee waiver is granted and a university supports a young person, there is an impact on the student support costs that my Department would otherwise be picking up.

Executive Committee Business

Charities Bill: Second Stage

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That the Second Stage of the Charities Bill [NIA 11/11-15] be agreed.

The primary reason for this Bill is to amend the public benefit provision in the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008, and my opening remarks will concentrate on this issue. The 2008 Act provided for a new regulatory framework for the charitable sector in Northern Ireland, consistent with developments in the other two UK jurisdictions and also in the Republic of Ireland. This was Northern Ireland's first major piece of charities legislation in more than 40 years. One of the most prominent changes introduced by the 2008 Act was a comprehensive definition of a charity. Express provision was made in section 2 of the Act, showing which purposes constitute charitable purposes. Similarly, section 3 specified the elements of the public benefit test to be met if an institution that was established exclusively for charitable purposes were to constitute a charity.

In June 2010, following a public consultation by the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland on the draft public benefit guidance document, attention was drawn to the construction of section 3 of the 2008 Act. This is a complex issue, and legal opinion was sought on application of this public benefit test in Northern Ireland. In simple terms, legal opinion concluded that the current section 3, which comprises elements of the public benefit provisions in the Charities and Trustee Investment (Scotland) Act 2005 and the Charities Act 2006 in England and Wales, produced a hybrid public benefit test that is not legislatively compatible with section 2, which makes provision about what constitutes charitable purposes.

On taking up my ministerial post in May 2011, I reviewed all of the evidence and consulted with various parties to bring the matter to resolution. I agreed that the inclusion of the Scottish provision created a technical difficulty, preventing the application of the definition of a charity. I was convinced that the Scottish provision did not provide a more rigorous and robust public benefit requirement as originally anticipated in the policy proposals leading to the 2008 Act. I am, therefore, recommending this Bill to bring the public benefit requirement into line with that in place in England and Wales.

Throughout the journey to resolve the legal issue, the Department and the Charity Commission worked together to enable the Department to bring forward subordinate legislation, which empowered the Commission to fulfil its regulatory role. In addition to the amendment to the public benefit test, the Bill provides a legislative vehicle for other necessary amendments to the 2008 Act. Company law references in the 2008 Act are amended to take account of the provisions of the Companies Act 2006, which were commenced following the enactment of the 2008 Act. Amendments made to charity legislation in England and Wales prior to consolidation by the Charities Act 2011 are replicated to modernise language, clarify existing legislation, repeal provisions that are now obsolete and make consequential amendments that were previously missed.

The Bill also provides for the transfer of functions that are of a regulatory nature, but that still remain within the Department's jurisdiction, to the Charity Commission. It also re-enacts a provision in the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 1964 that was repealed by the 2008 Act but that, on reconsideration, was believed to be a worthwhile mechanism for saving a charitable gift that would otherwise fail.

The Bill does not make changes to policy regarding charity law but clarifies the public benefit test, which is now called the public benefit requirement. This will enable the commission to engage in public consultation on its draft public benefit guidance. That will build on the comprehensive guidance in place in other UK Administrations, and local charities will have a direct opportunity to shape the public benefit requirements in Northern Ireland. Furthermore, the Bill makes best use of the opportunity to tidy up elements of the 2008 Act. It retains a level playing field for all charities in Northern Ireland. I am convinced that this is the right way to proceed and that it will provide a sound basis on which to take forward regulation of the charities sector.

11.30 am

Mr Maskey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I apologise to the Minister for missing his opening remarks. I was called away on personal business.

The Committee thanks the Minister for tailoring this Charities Bill. It has already given it some consideration, and that will continue at Committee Stage. The Committee welcomes the Bill in so far as its key element, as has been outlined, is to deal with the matter of public benefit. Clearly, the Charities Act 2008 was designed to introduce a system of registration, regulation, supervision and support for registered charities, but it was also designed to give the public confidence so that, when a person wishes to donate to an organisation, they know that it is a bona fide charitable organisation, and that their money, which is usually hard earned, will be spent on the purposes that the charity outlined in its appeal. Evidence tells us that society here is very generous, so it is important that we get this sector right.

The Committee considered the Bill having initially had a briefing from the Department. We then put out an early call for evidence to ensure that the Committee, in its deliberations, does not take too much time, which would unnecessarily hold the Bill up. The Committee is determined to deal with the Bill as quickly as possible in order to assist the Minister and the Department in having the legislation enacted. The key principle is the public benefit, and it is important that the Bill is passed as quickly as possible. That will enable the Charities Commission to consult further on the precise definition of what the public benefit will be determined to be, which will allow the commencement of the reform of the registration process and the further ongoing regulation of the system. To that extent, the Committee welcomes the Bill and looks forward to considering it in more detail at Committee Stage.

Ms P Bradley: I thank the Minister for bringing the Bill to the House today. As we are all aware, charities in Northern Ireland provide an invaluable service, not just to society but in supporting and helping the work of our statutory agencies. Charities rely heavily on the goodwill and support of the public in order to let them continue in this vital work. Philanthropy is at the heart of this goodwill, and charities need to ensure that philanthropists are confident that the financial and time resources that they give to charities go to the area of need that the charity has been established to address. To that end, the Charities Act attempted to help charities in giving that guarantee by establishing a Charity Commission with a remit that covers a range of responsibilities to protect, not just the charities, but their donors.

The most prominent of these responsibilities for me was the role in determining what constitutes a charity, as well as compiling a list of charities that would be accessible to anyone needing to verify whether a charity is genuine. Sadly, in this day and age, some unscrupulous people will invent false charities that people will donate to in good faith. That practice not only takes potential financial support from genuine charities but can lead to any potential philanthropist becoming jaded and cynical, therefore reducing the level of support that genuine charities can get. It is right and proper, however, that the legal ambiguities are investigated and checked, before such a register is fully operational, to ensure that all applicable organisations are included and that the criteria are fair and equal to everyone who applies. I am interested to know whether the Minister can use this opportunity to reassure the faith sector about the public benefit trust.

I also note that, despite the legal technicalities, the commission has begun to work on a deemed list of charities using the criterion of an organisation having registered with Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) for charitable purposes. It has also accepted that, until a proper list can be compiled, such organisations fall under the commission's jurisdiction. That practice has meant that, in the interim, the commission has been able to carry out its other roles and responsibilities.

I believe that the commission supports the clarification of the legal issues, which thus far have prevented the register being compiled. I also believe that the charities want the issue to be clarified and streamlined and that the public want the commission to be brought into full functionality as soon as possible. For that reason, I fully support the motion.

Mr Swann: I welcome the opportunity to speak in place of Michael Copeland, who is unavailable.

The Ulster Unionist Party believes that it is only appropriate to acknowledge the Charity Commission for the work that it has carried out to date in often challenging and unclear circumstances. Although the Charity Commission has been unable to carry out key responsibilities, we are pleased that the

time between the initial legal queries and now has not been spent totally in vain. The commission has produced a deemed list of charities over which it has been able to exercise limited powers.

As a former director of a number of charities who was not a Member in the previous mandate and who has not benefited from departmental briefings at the Committee, I think that the most obvious question that comes to mind is why the original Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 was not sufficiently worded to ensure that we did not have to carry out a tidying-up exercise, such as producing this Bill. It seems peculiar to me that Northern Ireland opted to include the element of the public benefit provision that was in the 2005 Scottish Act rather than the determination of the public benefit requirement being based on the law relating to charities in Northern Ireland. Had the 2008 Act been drafted a bit more vigilantly and there had been clarity in requirements to determine whether an institution was or was not a charity in the meaning of the word, I believe that the recent years of uncertainty and the delay in the Charity Commission carrying out even the most basic of its tasks, such as putting together a registry, could have been avoided. I thank the Minister for clarifying those issues in his opening remarks.

The Bill, the Second Stage of which we are being asked to agree, will effectively put to rest the dispute over public benefit. However, I note that the Minister has already identified this as an appropriate opportunity to rectify a number of outstanding, mainly technical, issues that would probably have required additional legislative change in the future. I am also reassured that the Department has now come down on the side of public consensus and agreed that the public benefit provision of the 2008 Act should replicate that already in force in England and Wales.

I am sure that at the initial discussion of the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 there was a robust debate about the need to recognise that, although regulation and harmonisation are important, it was, and still is, vital that charities are not drowned under a mountain of paperwork. It is crucial that flexibility and realism are used in the Charity Commission's day-to-day operations. I accept and understand why all charities, regardless of purpose, will be required to adhere to strict processes and to submit annual reports and statements of accounts to the Charity Commission. However, it is vital that we also acknowledge that some organisations are undoubtedly in a better position than others in being able to regularly provide such information. Northern Ireland has many large charities with significant incomes, which affords them the staff to look after the accounts and to make sure that everything is done by the book. However, we must remember that such charities are also the minority. Like many Members, most charities that I know and that I have been involved with will go week by week, if not day by day, scrutinising how every pound is spent. Those groups do not have the money to pay full-time admin staff, because they need to direct every available penny to front line services.

However, in point 8 of the explanatory and financial memorandum, I was surprised to read that it was deemed that "a public consultation was ... unnecessary". Although I accept that the technical changes in the transfer of a number of functions from the Department to the commission would little interest the public, I believe that they and all relevant stakeholders should have had the opportunity to have their opinions on the legislation known. That therefore places even greater importance on the consultation, which we expect the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland to conduct on its guidance on the public benefit test. Despite that, I do not want to take away from the welcome step forward that is being taken today.

Hopefully, by this time next year, the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland will be getting close to pulling together a comprehensive list of all the charities in the Province. It will not be easy, and it certainly will not be met without unease by many of the groups. It is crucial that the commission bring public opinion alongside it, for if it does not, it is effectively doomed to fail.

In conclusion, the Ulster Unionist Party supports the passage of the Charities Bill at this stage. It should never have had to come to this, and when it was clear that there was an issue, it still took far too long to resolve. At least we are rectifying that today.

Mr Durkan: I support the Charities Bill. The Bill's passage through the Assembly is certainly a welcome step in rectifying the problem with charity regulation in Northern Ireland. Prior to the introduction of the Bill, it had been increasingly difficult for the Charity Commission to make full determinations on whether an organisation is a charity, as the definition in the 2008 Act could not be applied until the public benefit issue had been resolved. That has caused considerable frustration to the commission, charities and the wider public.

The commission states that, over the past six months, 40% of the enquiries that it has received have been on charity registration. Until now, the Charity Commission has been unable to exert statutory authority to carry out its registration and regulatory functions owing to the fact that the public benefit requirement defined by section 3 of the Act is not workable on a technical, legal or practical level.

The problem mostly manifests itself in section 3, which relates to the public benefit requirement. The current legislation is, as the Minister identified, a hybrid of the drafting in English and Welsh charity legislation and Scottish charity legislation. Those pieces of legislation contain a different public benefit requirement, and therefore neither set of requirements can ever fully be complied with by charities in Northern Ireland.

It is certainly a welcome move that the Department has brought forward the Bill with a view to creating a consistent approach with the English and Welsh legislation so that the commission can work towards establishing a system that will allow regulation and accountability for the charity sector.

If the Bill is passed, it will allow the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland to begin consulting on its public benefit guidance and begin registration of charities. Thus, regulation will be able to begin. Although the Bill is only the beginning in creating a regulated charity sector, it is imperative that we support the Department's endeavours to create a viable system that supports charities and, most importantly, their beneficiaries.

The rewording of section 3 of the 2008 Act in clause 1 means that the Bill not only achieves parity with the legislative position in England and Wales but requires all charities seeking to be registered as thus to satisfy the same public benefit requirement. Therefore, it is fair and enhances accountability. That will create a system that will not only be easier for the commission to administer but will give the public confidence in knowing which charitable organisations are regulated. It will also undoubtedly provide donors with certainty that funds will be allocated to the cause that they seek to support.

The Charities Bill provides for much more, however, than the technical change to section 3 of the Charities Act 2008. It also sets out the transfer of some functions from the Department for Social Development to the commission and contains other minor and consequential amendments. One action that is worth noting is that the Bill will restore a provision for gifts of mixed purpose that was previously in place in Northern Ireland. Contained in clause 2, the provision has the potential to safeguard charitable assets that could be lost to the sector if the clause did not exist. It accounts for assets that can potentially be deemed to be or made charitable. Clause 2 allows the court or the commission to prevent a gift from failing to satisfy charity status if an intention to give charity can be shown. This is a welcome addition to the legislation.

11.45 am

I am pleased to have had the opportunity to speak on the Bill today, as it presents a chance for us to really focus on the crucial need for advancement of this long-awaited legislation. The role of the Charity Commission, and how the Assembly moves to support it, is central to the development of the charities sector.

Recently, the Social Development Committee discussed the issue of gift aid and the possibility of making gift aid an automatic donation. One issue raised during that meeting was that, currently, the proposals relate only to charities of a certain size. We are concerned that the smaller charities will miss out on this opportunity. That is a debate for another day, but I am hopeful that the increased role of the Charity Commission here will allow it to assist smaller charities and, with the Department, help to open up matters such as this. I support the Bill.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on the Bill today. As has already been said, the primary reasons for the Bill are to amend the public benefit provisions of the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 and to transfer functions from the Department for Social Development to the Charity Commission for Northern Ireland.

Others have already stated what each clause sets out to do, so I will not repeat that, but, having met representatives of various charities and the Charity Commission, I know that they are keen for the Bill to progress so that the commission can formally commence the registration process for charities as set out in the 2008 Act.

The UK consistently lags behind our Western counterparts such as the US in relation to charitable donations and philanthropy. Often, that is thought to be due to concerns about bogus and foreign charities being used to exploit the charitable system. Therefore, it seems that the best way to address those concerns, and to encourage more donations and strengthen the sector, is to have a fully operational Charity Commission.

I offer my support to the principles and objectives of the Bill at Second Stage.

Ms Brown: I welcome the Second Stage of the Bill. It is designed to transfer existing powers retained by the Department for Social Development to the newly established Charity Commission. The Charity Commission's role is to regulate charities and operate a system of registration in order to ensure good governance in which people can have confidence.

The people of Northern Ireland are known for their generous giving to a wide range of charities and good causes. Even in these times of economic uncertainty, when families are being faced with the rising cost of basic necessities such as food, fuel, clothing and other essentials, people still manage to donate consistently and generously to others who are less fortunate than themselves.

In these days when every penny counts, people need that extra reassurance that their donations are, indeed, going to worthy and reputable causes. Sadly, there are those in our society who are willing to abuse the good nature of donors for their own personal and fraudulent gain.

It is not always possible in the midst of a busy town centre to examine fully the detail on a collection box or a clipboard. This Bill, when fully implemented, should help give us the confidence that our money is indeed going to the most needy and deserving causes without fear or doubt.

The primary reason for the Bill is to amend the public benefit provisions of the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 2008. That should provide clarity in determining whether an institution is or is not a charity within the meaning of the 2008 Act.

Given that many of the Bill's clauses are technical, I will say nothing more at this point. I look forward to working with colleagues to ensure that the Bill receives the necessary scrutiny to allow people in Northern Ireland to continue giving generously and supporting good causes. I support the motion.

Mr Allister: I support the Bill, but I recognise the sense of embarrassment that should attach to the Assembly in bringing it forward. It is an admission that, after 40 years of being well served by the Charities Act (Northern Ireland) 1964, when this Assembly got round to reviewing and amending that legislation in 2008 it got it hopelessly wrong. No doubt on that occasion, as has happened today, many Members stood up and read from prepared scripts — prepared by whoever — exalting the contents of the 2008 Bill, which then became an Act, and telling us how necessary, wise and right it all was.

Yet here we are today having to acknowledge how wrong it was got. Who got it wrong? Who were the advisers? What was the Department doing to get it so wrong in 2008? I acknowledge that the present Minister was not the Minister then — that dubious honour fell to someone else in these circumstances — but it was the same Department. Expert advisers in the Department brought forward legislation that was supposed to be considered and thought out and supposed to address precisely what was seen to be the legislative need, but they patently got it wrong.

Perhaps when the Minister comes to answer, he will begin to explain how the Department got it so wrong in 2008, why we have to pick up the pieces today, and why, in the meantime, the work of the charity commissioners has been stymied, with their being unable even to complete a register of charities in Northern Ireland. Some in the House would be very quick, glad and eager to blame this on direct rule, but this was a mistake of this House. It was a faux pas made in Stormont. How was it made? Some explanation might be useful.

I said that the 1964 legislation, which was the creature of another Stormont, served us well, and so it did. It is significant that today we are returning significantly and substantially to the very terminology of that Act. Indeed, we are restating exactly what section 24 of the 1964 Act said about how you deal with cy-près schemes and make the adjustment when, in time, adjustment is required to benevolent and other bequests of a charitable nature. Here we are reinstating exactly what was taken out and discovering that what was right 50-plus years ago is still right and necessary today.

Clause 1 of the Bill attracts a little bit of my attention because of the manner in which it is drafted. It will substitute section 3 of the 2008 Act with a new section 3. The Minister might like to explain a little more of proposed new section 3(3) to the House. It states:

"In this Act any reference to the public benefit is a reference to the public benefit as that term is understood for the purposes of the law relating to charities in Northern Ireland."

There are obvious questions. Understood by whom? Does it provide for a moving feast? Does that terminology provide for lack of certainty as to what will be defined as a public benefit? Maybe there is good reason for saying that matters can evolve and, therefore, as the courts decree on and decide issues, we should have a definition that evolves with it. If that is the explanation, let us hear it. However, legislation, by its nature, tends to be more specific than how it is couched in that clause. I would certainly like to hear some amplification of the detail of what will be section 3(3) of the 2008 Act as amended.

Will the Minister also advise us whether the changes to the public benefit provision will have any implications from the HMRC perspective? No doubt this has been checked with the Treasury, so what is the result of that checking? Those comments apart, I think that this is necessary legislation. I repeat my surprise that we got to this point, but it is better to put things right now than to never put them right. Having said that, I support the Bill.

Mr McCausland: I start by thanking Members for their contributions to today's debate. Charity is a subject that will resonate with all Members of the Assembly. Each of us has knowledge and experience of the charitable sector in its varying forms in all our constituencies and indeed throughout the country.

The valuable contributions that charities make to our society have been referenced not only in this debate but in many other debates in the Assembly. I firmly believe in the need for a framework that will protect and support the charitable sector, that will encourage good governance and that will secure public confidence in charitable giving.

This is important legislation that will enable full effect to be given to the 2008 Act. It will make it possible to develop the intended framework for the regulation of charities and fully empower the Charity Commission to promote best practice and regulate the management and governance of the charitable sector. It is a crucial step towards the open and transparent regulation of charities in a way that will preserve public trust and confidence in the sector.

I want to turn to some of the issues that have been raised during the debate. I will pick up on the point raised by Robin Swann that some organisations are large and more sophisticated while others are small, lack the same degree of sophistication and may not be as well placed to meet the requirements of the legislation. The Charity Commission for Northern Ireland will be tasked with producing detailed guidance for charities on the requirements for reporting. There will be different requirements depending on the annual turnover of the charity, and, therefore, those requirements will be proportionate as regards oversight and obligations. For well-run charities, no matter what their size, there should be no cause for concern in this legislation. I hope that the Member will be reassured by that.

Mr Allister asked why the wording was not drafted correctly in the 2008 Act. I point out, as he has done already, that it was not my responsibility at the time; it was the responsibility of another Member who was Minister then. However, to put the matter on record, the charity advisory group in Northern Ireland recommended a hybrid approach, blending the English and Welsh legislation with the Scottish legislation and blending the best of the public benefit provisions. That approach was then agreed through public consultation. However, legal counsel opinion was that this approach was open to challenge. Therefore, I was satisfied that the amendment that we are bringing forward in this legislation was required to achieve certainty for the sector.

Mr Allister also made the point about Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs. One of the key elements in bringing forward this legislation has been the discussion and correspondence with HMRC on the whole matter. Members will realise that for many charities it is the tax benefit that they get through gift aid, the tax relief, that is of particular value to them in supporting their work and in ensuring that they maximise their income.

We have liaised closely with HMRC and, indeed, Her Majesty's Treasury on the matter, and we are certain, on the basis of those discussions, that we are moving in the right direction. In fact, this is the direction in which they require us to move, rather than some others that might be contemplated. It is important that that is noted, and we have done that very thoroughly. Those were the main points covered. If I have missed any others, I apologise and will respond to Members in writing.

This is good legislation. It clarifies and corrects something that would have created a difficulty for us. It will enable the Charity Commission to undertake its work and carry it forward in the fullest possible way, and it will be of benefit to the charities, those who support charities and those who are helped by the charities. I assure you that I will closely examine the report of today's debate. If specific points have been raised that I have not addressed, I will write to the Member who made them. I commend the Bill for the Assembly's approval.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Second Stage of the Charities Bill [NIA 11/11-15] be agreed.

12.00 noon

Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Levies) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That the Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Levies) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

The regulations change the rates at which the pension protection fund's administration levy and the general levy on occupational and personal pension schemes are payable in respect of 2012-13 and subsequent years. Members may find it helpful if I provide some background to the provisions.

The Pensions Act 2004 set up the pension protection fund to provide compensation for members of eligible occupational pension schemes where the sponsoring employer is insolvent and the scheme has insufficient assets to pay benefits at the fund compensation levels. I am sure that Members will agree that it is important to ensure that the pension protection fund has the resources to carry out its very important task effectively and efficiently. The pension protection fund is funded through an annual levy charged to all qualifying defined benefit occupational pension schemes. A separate levy on eligible schemes means that the schemes, rather than the general taxpayer, fund the board of the pension protection fund's administration costs.

Section 170 of the Pension Schemes (Northern Ireland) Act 1993 allows for the administration costs of the Pensions Regulator, the Pensions Advisory Service and the Pensions Ombudsman to be recovered by means of an annual general levy on occupational and personal pension schemes. Those pensions bodies play a vital role in ensuring that schemes' members' interests are safeguarded and that members have access to impartial advice. Both levies are payable by eligible pension schemes, and the amounts payable are calculated on a sliding scale depending on the number of scheme members. The levies are collected annually by the Pensions Regulator on behalf of the Department and the Department for Work and Pensions. In simple terms, the combined effect of the regulations that are to be confirmed today and the corresponding Great Britain regulations is a reduction in the rate of both levies. Members will be interested to know that those levies have remained unchanged since April 2008. The rates for the pension protection fund's administration levy and the general levy are set to meet forecast future administration costs for the respective pensions bodies and are reviewed annually. The reduction in the rates is based on the analysis of scheme data and levy collection rates. The rates are set to avoid frequent changes and to smooth any annual deficits or surpluses over a number of years. For example, in light of a surplus of £6.4 million, the pension protection fund's administration levy is now set at the level necessary to collect £16 million, instead of £22 million, to cover running costs for 2012-13 onwards. Basically, the levies have reduced because a surplus has accumulated and because of reduced administrative costs. I am sure that the

reduced rates are welcomed by levy payers, as well as pension scheme trustees, members and sponsoring employees.

Mr Brady (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. The Committee considered the original SL1 pertaining to this statutory rule at its meeting on 1 March 2012 and was content at that time for the rule to be made. As noted by the Minister, the rates applied to the levies are reviewed annually and have been unchanged for a number of years. It is reasonable to provide funding for members of eligible occupational pension schemes where the sponsoring employer is insolvent and the scheme has insufficient assets to pay benefits at fund compensation levels. In that regard, it is important to note that the levies are applied only to all qualifying defined benefit occupational pension schemes and not to the general taxpayer. As the rule simply amends an existing statutory levy regime and, as advised by the Department, has only a negligible impact on cost for business, charities or voluntary bodies, the Committee is content to support it.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Minister may wish to make some concluding remarks.

Mr McCausland: I am pleased that we have the support of the Committee. I thank its members for the positive way in which they have dealt with the matter. The reduced rates for levies meet forecast future administration costs for the pensions bodies and lessen, therefore, the cost pressures on pension schemes. The regulations apply to 2012-13 and subsequent financial years. The rates are reviewed yearly, and further regulations will be brought forward when it is considered that a change to the rates will be needed. I commend the motion to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.
Resolved:*

That the Occupational and Personal Pension Schemes (Levies) (Amendment) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Pensions (2008 Act) (Abolition of Contracting-out for Defined Contribution Pension Schemes) (Consequential Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr Deputy Speaker: The next two items of business are motions to approve statutory rules that deal with matters related to the abolition of contracting-out for defined contribution pension schemes and the associated protected rights. There will be a separate debate on each statutory rule. However, during the first debate, the Minister and Members will be allowed some latitude to address the broad policy issues that are common to both motions. I hope that the House will find that helpful.

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That the Pensions (2008 Act) (Abolition of Contracting-out for Defined Contribution Pension Schemes) (Consequential Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

I am very conscious that, in dealing with pensions, it is all too easy to get lost in the maze of technical provisions and pensions jargon. Anyone who has read the rules that we are considering today will know that they are complex and highly technical. I will try, however, to keep my comments at a fairly high level, and, although some jargon is unfortunately inevitable, I will try to keep it to a minimum.

Perhaps it would be helpful if I outlined what is meant by contracting out. Basically, contracting-out is using a pension scheme to provide benefits in place of the additional state pension, now known as state second pension. In view of the fact that additional state pension is not payable, the state partially funds these schemes through national insurance rebates, tax relief etc. In 2005, the independent Pensions Commission chaired by Adair Turner recommended the abolition of contracting out on a defined contribution basis. In a defined contribution scheme, the amount of a person's pension pot depends on two main elements: the amount paid in and the performance of the markets in which the contributions are invested. The commission's view was that the contracting out/contracting in choice added complexity to the UK pensions system and was poorly understood. There was widespread agreement that it was difficult, even for experts, to judge whether a particular person would be better off contracted into the state additional pension or contracted out into a defined

contribution scheme. The commission's recommendation was accepted, and the Pensions Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 and the Pensions (No. 2) Act (Northern Ireland) 2008 provided for the abolition of contracting out for occupational and personal pension schemes that contract out on a defined contribution basis, as well as for the abolition of the rules governing contracted-out rights in such schemes, known as protected rights.

The rule, together with the Pensions (2008 No. 2 Act) (Abolition of Protected Rights) (Consequential Provisions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012, makes changes to primary and secondary legislation consequential on abolition. They remove the rules and references relating to contracting out on a defined contribution basis and associated protection rights, with effect from 6 April 2012. However, some provisions will remain in place for a transitional period until 2015 to allow for the completion of necessary actions, such as those relating to late paid contributions. For example, the regulations make transitional provision for the three years following the abolition date, for example, to cover late payments to the schemes, and they omit or replace references to and provisions that relate to schemes that are contracted out on a defined contribution basis. The regulations also make amendments to provide that defined contribution contracted-out schemes must inform affected members that the scheme has ceased to be contracted-out and explain the effect of that change on members' entitlement to state additional pension within certain time limits, and they make amendments relating to transfers to be made from defined benefit contracted-out schemes to other schemes, such as defined contribution schemes, as long as certain safeguards are met.

The rules that we are considering today make technical consequential provision flowing from the Assembly's decision to provide for the abolition of contracting out on a defined contribution basis in the Pensions Act 2008.

Mr Brady (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): A LeasCheann Comhairle, this rule and the following order on the abolition of protected rights are linked. They amend the existing law consequential on the abolition of contracting out for defined contribution pension schemes and the associated protected rights. For example, both rules remove obsolete references and make transitional provision. As Members might remember from the debate on the Pensions Bill, such issues are notoriously technical and often little understood outside a relatively small number of experts whose word we often have to take as true.

Contracting out provides a private pension alternative to the state additional pension. However, the independent Pensions Commission recommended abolishing contracting out for occupational, personal and stakeholder pension schemes that contract out on a defined contribution basis as far back as 2005, in part because the rules were too complex and poorly understood. That left people in a position where it was difficult to determine whether it was advantageous to contract out into a defined contribution pension scheme or stay with the state additional pension scheme. I think that we would all agree that transparency in financial matters is to be welcomed. Among other things, the regulations provide for members of such schemes to be informed of the cessation of the scheme and to have the effect of that change on members' entitlement to state additional pensions explained to them within certain time limits. Additionally, they make amendments relating to transfers to be made from defined benefit contracted-out schemes to other schemes, as long as certain safeguards are met.

At its meeting on 23 June 2011, the Committee had no objections to the original SL1 pertaining to the legislation, and, at its meeting on 6 September, it agreed that the regulations should be confirmed by the Assembly. The Committee is therefore content to support the regulations. Go raibh maith agat.

12.15 pm

Mr McCausland: Mr Deputy Speaker, I thank the Social Development Committee for the positive way in which it has dealt with these matters. The provisions contained in the rule support the delivery of abolition of defined contribution contracting out. I commend the motion to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.
Resolved:*

That the Pensions (2008 Act) (Abolition of Contracting-out for Defined Contribution Pension Schemes) (Consequential Provisions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Pensions (2008 No. 2 Act) (Abolition of Protected Rights) (Consequential Provisions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr McCausland (The Minister for Social Development): I beg to move

That the Pensions (2008 No. 2 Act) (Abolition of Protected Rights) (Consequential Provisions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

The rule makes changes to primary and secondary legislation in consequence of the abolition of protected rights. "Protected rights" is the collective term used for the national insurance rebate, tax relief and associated investment returns. In short, it is the state's contribution to the defined contribution pension scheme.

Under the defined contribution contracting-out system, there were special rules applicable to protected rights. There were, for example, restrictions on the type of scheme in which protected rights could be invested or to which they could be transferred. Protected rights had to be recorded separately from other scheme rights, adding to the complexity and cost associated with running the pension scheme. Abolition removes such rules, and what were protected rights are now treated in the same way as other scheme benefits.

The order makes the necessary largely technical consequential amendments. For example, it omits or replaces references to and provisions that relate to protected rights; provides for a minimum payment provision for late rebate payments and recoveries; makes transitional provision for the three years following the abolition date; amends the disclosure of information requirements with which schemes must comply for the abolition of protected rights; provides for a single contracted-out deduction rate for survivors' pensions from the abolition date; and provides for age-related payments etc to be made to another scheme or the individual, rather than the former contracted-out scheme, where the earner is no longer a member of that scheme.

In summary, the combined effect of the order and the regulations that we considered earlier is to make consequential provision following abolition of contracting out on a defined contribution basis and associated protection rights.

Mr Brady (The Deputy Chairperson of the Committee for Social Development): Go raibh maith agat, a LeasCheann Comhairle. I apologise if this sounds repetitive.

Protected rights are pension rights derived from the state's contribution to the pension scheme through lower national insurance contributions and payments from HMRC and so on. Protected rights are subject to special rules and have to be kept separate from other pension rights under the scheme.

The order makes amendments to primary and subordinate legislation in consequence of the abolition of protected rights. For example, it makes transitional provision for the three years following the abolition date; amends the disclosure of information requirements that schemes must comply with for their contracting-out status; and provides that, from the abolition date, a contracted-out deduction from a survivor's state additional pension entitlement of 50% is to be applied to a survivor of a member of a former defined contribution contracted-out scheme in all cases. Currently, it is 100% or 50%, depending on whether the member dies before annuitising their protected rights. The order also provides for age-related payments and so on to be made to another scheme or the individual, rather than the former contracted-out scheme, where the earner is no longer a member of that scheme.

The Committee had no objections to the original SL1 pertaining to the legislation at its meeting on 23 June 2011 and agreed at its meeting of 6 September that it should be confirmed by the Assembly. The Committee is, therefore, content to support the order.

Mr McCausland: Again, I thank the Chair and the Deputy Chair of the Social Development Committee for the manner in which they have dealt with the matter. I am pleased that there is support for the order across the Assembly, and I am happy to commend the motion to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved:

That the Pensions (2008 No. 2 Act) (Abolition of Protected Rights) (Consequential Provisions) Order (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

Mr Deputy Speaker: The Business Committee has arranged to meet after the lunchtime suspension. I therefore propose, by leave of the Assembly, to suspend the sitting until 2.00 pm. The first item of business when we return will be Question Time.

The sitting was suspended at 12.20 pm.

On resuming (Mr Speaker in the Chair) —

2.00 pm

Oral Answers to Questions

Finance and Personnel

Executive: Tax Receipts

1. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether the reduction in the receipt of British Government tax receipts will have any impact on the public finance available to the Executive. (AQO 2385/11-15)

Mr Wilson (The Minister of Finance and Personnel): The recently announced fall in Government receipts will not have any direct immediate impact on the resources that are available to the Executive because the public expenditure period for the UK is for four years up to 2014-15. The funds have been allocated to us, principally through the Barnett formula, for that period. However, I am sure that the July increase in net borrowing is disappointing for the Government. If it continues, it will have longer-term implications and, as I have said to the Assembly on previous occasions, looking ahead beyond the current period, the Office for Budget Responsibility has indicated that there will be further spending constraints, at least for the first two years of the next spending period and, indeed, the Prime Minister has indicated that the austerity measures could extend up to 2020.

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his reply. In the event of further austerity measures, has the Minister any proposals for mitigating any reductions to the Executive?

Mr Wilson: Our Budget is protected for the period up to 2014-15. However, as I have made clear to the Assembly time and again, we have to prepare in the longer run for what we can do to restructure the way we spend money. Almost every week in the Assembly, there are demands for more money to be spent on one thing or another. The first thing that we should not be doing is making commitments that are unfunded for the future because it puts further pressure on budgets that are a bit uncertain anyhow. Secondly, and this will require very hard economic decisions, we have to look at some of the restructuring that we need to do. For example, what do we do with some of our public services where, currently, we cannot bring in private sector money, pension fund money or other additional resources to do some of the infrastructure work because it scores against the departmental expenditure limit? That may well mean that we have to make hard decisions about the structure of some of the public organisations that we have in Northern Ireland that cannot at present draw in private money. Lastly, we have to ask about many of the assets we have. Sometimes people defend them, and we have even had people talking about us selling off the family silver, etc. If we have assets that we are not using or fully using, do we dispose of them to bring in additional revenue? There may well also be hard decisions to be taken about additional revenue streams that we need for the future.

Mr McDevitt: Given that the dogs in the streets of Whitehall have been barking all summer about the fact that there is a further crisis in public expenditure ahead of us, can the Minister give us some good news and inform us that he has successfully concluded the negotiations on the transfer of corporation tax powers to this region and give us a date by which we can expect to get that power back in our hands?

Mr Wilson: I wish that I could give that kind of news, but the transfer of those powers is dependent upon not just the willingness of the Executive to have them but the willingness of the Government at Westminster to make that devolution.

This ties in well with Mr Boylan's question. As I have said to the Assembly time and again, if we are going to make commitments — for example, on the devolution of corporation tax — the Assembly will expect me and the rest of the negotiating team from the Executive to ensure that it comes to us with the least possible cost, especially if there are to be further austerity measures and pressures on the Budget in the future. For that reason, we will continue to fight with the Treasury over the cost of the devolution of corporation tax. We know that we will have to pay a price, but we want to make sure that it is fair, reasonable and a realistic assessment of the true cost.

Mr Beggs: The Minister has indicated that there is no short-term implication as regards the reduction of taxation receipts. Her Majesty's Government have announced additional capital projects in the past

few months. Can the Minister indicate whether there are any Barnett consequential for ourselves that will enable further capital expenditure in Northern Ireland?

Mr Wilson: We examine every announcement from the Government to see whether there are Barnett consequential for Northern Ireland. There is always a bit of trading over that, and, at times, I feel that the Treasury tries to indicate that there is no Barnett consequential when there is. I have reported to the Assembly many times that there were clearly Barnett consequential in respect of spending on the Olympics, and Scotland, Wales and ourselves fought a long battle with the Treasury and finally got some small compensation, although I do not believe that we got all the compensation that we should have got. So, we will examine any capital announcements very closely, and if we believe that there is a Barnett consequential — something that should have a United Kingdom-wide impact — we will negotiate with the Treasury and demand that we get that. Do not forget, in the most recent monitoring round, there was, I think, about £13.5 million of Barnett consequential for distribution to Departments in June.

Mr Allister: The Minister might have reminded the tabler of the question that if we had followed his advice, we would be in a bankrupt Republic with no comfort of a block grant or Barnett formula. However, one thing that would impact on our spending capacity and Treasury receipts is the folly of the transfer of corporation tax. Can the Minister update us on what would now be the expected hit on the block grant if corporation tax was transferred?

Mr Wilson: Had the Member been here yesterday, he would have known that when Sinn Féin Members talked about full fiscal devolution, I made the point that that would include the devolution of the £9,000 million deficit that we have every year. Even with all the economic expertise that rests on the Benches across the way, I do not know how they would have ever been able to fill that particular gap.

We are still fighting with the Treasury over the full cost of corporation tax, and that is already in the public domain. If we were to go with the last discussion that we had with the Treasury on this issue — although there have been negotiations over the summer, and I understand that there is at least some softening on this — the initial figure plus the method by which the Treasury established the ongoing assessment of our corporation tax liability would have increased the cost of corporation tax devolution to £700 million per year.

Rates: Empty Homes

2. **Mr Irwin** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he will consider additional media publicity to ensure that ratepayers are not unnecessarily paying rates on empty homes which are in a dilapidated state and unfit for human habitation. (AQO 2386/11-15)

Mr Wilson: There has already been significant publicity on the rating of empty homes. The Department, through Land and Property Services, issued a mailshot, which includes a fact sheet, and when people get their rates bills, that information is conveyed to them. There is also information on the Northern Ireland Direct website. That kind of targeted advertisement and communication is best, rather than a widespread advertising campaign. So, I am convinced that we are doing all that we can to convey to people that empty homes will be rated, that they can have exemptions, how they can apply for exemptions and who will qualify for exemptions. Therefore, there are no plans to have any further campaign on this issue.

Mr Irwin: I thank the Minister for his reply. How many exclusions from the rating of empty homes have been granted since the introduction of the measure?

Mr Wilson: There have been a number of exclusions. First, I will go through what some of the exclusions are. People can apply for exclusions once those have gone on to the list. The vast majority of exclusions — I think that, to date, there have been 5,400 — are developers' exclusions. In the current climate, we do not want house building to stop. We want to have a supply of houses available to people. So, when a developer builds a house and a completion certificate has been issued, they have an exclusion of up to 18 months. I think that there are around 5,400 developers' exclusions. There have been about 1,500 exclusions where people have claimed that their properties are not habitable and are, therefore, exempt from rates. There have also been 2,500 exemptions for premises that have a net annual valuation of less than £20,000.

Mr Kinahan: Is there a clear and unambiguous definition of "dilapidated" and "unfit for human habitation" in respect of domestic dwellings?

Mr Wilson: When it comes to a definition, the circumstances in different homes will, obviously, differ. In fact, I think that one of the difficulties of having a very strict definition — we talked about this when the legislation was going through — is that if you say a house that does not have a, b, c and d will be exempt, you will almost encourage people who have an empty property to put it into that position. So, there is a certain degree of subjectivity when it comes to making a judgement. That is why, when people appeal, the valuer will go out and look at the state of the house. In some cases, it may be that a house is not capable of being lived in because the floors have collapsed. In other cases, it may be that the house does not have certain facilities, such as electricity or whatever. So, we do not make a prescribed list. There is guidance, and valuers will go out and make a judgement. I think that that is probably the best way to ensure that we do not have abuse of the system.

Mr Durkan: What exemptions exist for business premises?

Mr Wilson: If business premises are unoccupied, there is a 50% rate reduction. Of course, even if those business premises are put into use but have been empty for a year, there will be a 50% extension for that year to encourage businesses to enter the premises. So, there is a 50% rate exemption for such properties.

Flooding: Agency Funding

3. **Mrs Cochrane** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel what funding the Executive will give to the various Departments broken down by different agency to alleviate flooding. (AQO 2387/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I cannot comment on any potential funding that there may be for flood alleviation because that will, of course, depend on what money becomes available in monitoring rounds and how the Executive decide to allocate that money. However, Ministers can prioritise their spending within the existing budgets for the Department for Regional Development or the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), for example. They can prioritise their capital budgets so that, where flood problems arise, schemes can be quickly put in place. So, there are two things. There is the potential for funding in the future, which is up to the Executive, and there is the immediate availability of money where individual Ministers decide to prioritise schemes.

Mrs Cochrane: I thank the Minister for his answer, although I am not sure that I got exactly what I was looking for. You made an announcement earlier in the summer to say that money had been set aside to deal with cases such as the summer flooding. Can you confirm that there is now secured finance for the entire Connswater Community Greenway scheme to be completed, including the associated flood alleviation works?

2.15 pm

Mr Wilson: I am sorry if the answer that I gave the Member was not the one that she wanted. However, the question that she asked was about what money would be given. Of course, I cannot anticipate what money would be available or how it would be allocated.

The Connswater scheme was mentioned. The Executive made a decision on three areas: Sicily Park; Cushendall; and the Connswater greenway. The Executive's commitment was that the funding that is required for the Rivers Agency's part of the scheme would be funded from the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development's budget because, as the Member will know, much more work is involved on the greenway than just flood alleviation. It was the Executive's view that those resources were available given the fact that, two year's ago, DARD made a capital bid to the Budget of £50.2 million for flood alleviation, only around half of which was eventually allocated for that. It is, therefore, a question for the Minister to re-prioritise spending.

Mr Cree: I thank the Minister for his response and particularly for the tactical nature of decisions. Have any strategic decisions been made on funding for that sort of project during the remainder of the current spending period?

Mr Wilson: It is really up to individual Ministers to make strategic decisions. The Member will be aware that the performance and efficiency delivery unit (PEDU) was called in to review flooding incidents and recommend what our response should be. That report should be with the Executive shortly. It will recommend not only some short-term measures but some strategic ways in which Ministers should respond. One thing that I have to say is that, where problems are identified that cause people's houses to flood three or four times in one year — I have seen some of those houses — priority should be given to try to deal with those problems. Why would we pay out £1,000 a time to those people when, sometimes, strategic spending could avoid having to pay that out and the households having to go through that trauma three or four times a year?

Mr Storey: Following on from his comments on PEDU, I commend the Minister for the work that PEDU has done, particularly in areas such as education with regard to transport and school meals. Can he assure the House that the PEDU team has looked at other areas where there are particular flooding problems, such as Scotland, where work was recently carried out by the Scottish Executive to ensure that flooding issues were resourced appropriately and Departments were held to account for those issues?

Mr Wilson: One thing that I must say about the PEDU team is that it is very thorough when it goes in to look at an issue. We are not proud of those issues and we want to learn from other people who have had experiences, and one thing that PEDU has sought to do is to look at what has happened in other Administrations and how some of the lessons that have been learnt there can be transferred to Northern Ireland.

Ulster Bank: Compensation

4. **Mr Gardiner** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel whether he has communicated with the Ulster Bank over the level of compensation being paid to customers. (AQO 2388/11-15)

Mr Wilson: I have not had any specific discussions with the Ulster Bank about the actual level of compensation. However, as I reported to the House on a number of occasions, I met and have spoken to the Ulster Bank regularly since the problem occurred with its computer system. Indeed, a couple of days before the compensation scheme was announced, I was in communication with the Ulster Bank to talk about the detail of the scheme and to advise it, based on my experience, of what I believed should be included in it.

Mr Gardiner: I thank the Minister for his very positive answer. In one sense, it was neither clear nor beneficial. Does he think that the £20 that was paid to the Ulster Bank's customers was adequate?

Mr Wilson: I do not know whether I was being complimented there or not — it was neither clear nor beneficial. *[Laughter.]* Anyhow, I will take it as a compliment, although I am not sure that it was intended as such.

I do not think that the £20 compensation was adequate. I did not experience it. When I was told that that was the level, I thought that many people might well regard it as derisory. That was a decision that Ulster Bank had to make, and it made it in concert with the Financial Services Authority (FSA). It is part of a package, of course, because there is not just the refund to consider but the reimbursement. Where there was reimbursement, there will be an additional 20% top-up to, I think, a maximum of £100. There was also the reassurance to customers about credit rating and a recognition that difficulties were caused by individuals.

I suspect that, at the end of the day, despite what the Ulster Bank will do to compensate them for the problems, many people will still be very unhappy. In discussions with the Ulster Bank, I indicated that, in some cases, especially in some that I heard about, money will really not be the way to compensate people anyway, given that they went through a horrific time. The important thing now is that the Financial Services Authority has demanded a review of what happened and of why it took so long to sort out, and I am looking forward to seeing that report.

Mr McKay: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I suspect that there is consensus across the House that the communication between the bank and customers was absolutely diabolical over the

summer. Given that there needs to be systems of accountability and confidence in banks, should some members of the senior management in the bank not now be considering their positions?

Mr Wilson: I suppose that until we see the outcome of the review of what went wrong, why it went wrong, what was done to fix it and whether everything that could have been done to fix it was done, it is probably a bit premature simply to say that people should fall on their swords. Who do we want to fall on their swords? I am sure that the Member is not conversant with all the details of how things went wrong or, indeed, with whether local management was even involved in how things went wrong.

As far as the communication with customers was concerned, as I say, I met and talked with members of management regularly. One of the points that I made to them — this is what was coming through to me — was that they should be honest with customers. I said that if the issue was going to take five weeks to sort out, they should tell customers that it will be five weeks, not five days, because that would be the worst possible thing. I think that, at the end of the day, that advice was taken rather belatedly, and much more realistic timescales were communicated to customers.

Lord Morrow: I sure that it has not missed the Minister's attention that the Northern Bank lost a large sum of money at one time, so I wonder whether any experiences could be drawn from that. Can the Minister assure the House that he is totally satisfied that the Ulster Bank has put in all the necessary resources to sort out this matter? As you intimated, a lot of clients and customers had a lot of inconvenience to put up with.

Mr Wilson: When I met Sir Philip Hampton, that was the first question I put to him. I asked, "Has this dragged on because you are simply playing at it, and what resources have you been putting into it?". From my understanding, this was a technical problem, so it was not a case of just anybody in the bank being able to sort it out. A very small group of people were capable of sorting it out, and they worked on it diligently.

When I met them, I also indicated that, as far as people having to present themselves at the banks was concerned, the banks should open for longer hours in the evening and at weekends. Indeed, and this was probably a big resource demand on the bank, the banks were open even during the holiday over the Twelfth fortnight so that people could have access. The point that I made during any conversations I had with the Ulster Bank was that, regardless of what it costs, customers must have access to their money, and if that meant bringing in additional staff to interface with customers, that should be done. Opening times were extended, and the number of staff doing that work, right up even to manager level, was increased.

Mr D Bradley: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Gabhaim buíochas leis an Aire as a fhreagra go dtí seo. Tá pointe beag agam le hardú leis. The Minister will no doubt be aware of the deep dissatisfaction among Ulster Bank customers with the compensation scheme. Has he reflected or will he reflect that dissatisfaction in his discussions with the bank?

Mr Wilson: At the end of the day, it is for the Ulster Bank to decide what compensation scheme is adopted. As I said to the Member, before the compensation scheme was announced, its detail was communicated to me, and I indicated that I believed that there would be some dissatisfaction with some of the compensation offers that were made. The bank assured me that it was a result of its discussions with the FSA, its business customers, and so on. The Ulster Bank will bear the consequences of how customers view the compensation package that has been offered.

Government: Revenue Raising

5. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Finance and Personnel to outline what revenue-raising initiatives he has identified for consideration over the remainder of this Assembly Term. (AQO 2389/11-15)

Mr Wilson: As part of the Budget process, the Executive explored a wide range of initiatives that would generate additional revenue. Some £90 million of additional revenue-raising measures were included in the Budget over the next four years. Those measures are, of course, reviewed regularly by the ministerial Budget review group, which ensures that the targets are realised and looks at additional revenue-raising initiatives. The Budget review group will continue that work in the future.

Mr Dallat: Will the Minister tell us why many of those revenue-raising initiatives did not reach the level predicted in that famous draft Budget speech, which, I am sure, every Member reads nightly, after their evening prayers of course?

Mr Wilson: I must say that the Member leads a very sad life if he reads the Budget statement nightly. I do not know which particular measures he is referring to. We have exceeded the amount of capital receipts raised, with, I think, £170 million raised against a target of £142 million. There are, of course, some capital receipts that have not been realised yet, and the Minister for Regional Development is working on the £40 million that we intend to raise from the Belfast Harbour Commissioners. However, given that that money was not to be raised until the last two years of the Budget period, it was not due to be realised by this time anyway. We have already raised money from the housing associations by changing —

Mr Hamilton: Despite the scepticism of his Minister.

Mr Wilson: Yes. As I am reminded, we have done that despite the scepticism that there was. The housing associations are happily working away and realising the money. We are also realising the money from the regional rates increase, so I am not too sure to which particular measure the Member is referring.

Mr Mitchel McLaughlin: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. Does the Minister remain confident that we will meet the targets on receipts from asset sales during this Budget period?

Mr Wilson: We set ourselves a very challenging target, and, only this morning, we had a story on the news about how asset prices have fallen over the period. It will be a challenging target, and throughout the Budget discussions, I made it clear that there are lots of variables that could impact on it. Nevertheless, we realised all the capital receipt targets, and more, for the first year of the Budget, and, with our best endeavours, we will continue to ensure that that happens for the rest of the Budget period. The reason why the Budget review group is in place is so that it does not suddenly hit us that we have not realised our target. The group is there to ensure that there is an early warning system in place, and we can then decide what adjustments need to be made.

2.30 pm

Mr G Robinson: Will the Minister provide a breakdown of the initial £900 million of additional revenue-raising proposals incorporated into the Budget 2011-15?

Mr Wilson: First of all, it was £900 million. I think I said £90 million, but it was £900 million, in case somebody picks up on that. The main sources included the additional rates revenue, which was £200 million over the year. That was simply keeping rates in line with inflation. There was also the money from Belfast Port, £40 million. Capital receipts that were identified within Departments were £444 million, and the asset management unit was to identify an additional £100 million capital receipts. We had then carried over some money, and there was the money from housing associations. We were saying that we would reduce the amount of grant to housing associations and they would then draw on their reserves. That was our way of tapping into the housing associations' reserves and of course we have met the targets on all of those things to date.

Health, Social Services and Public Safety

Mr Speaker: Questions 6 and 9 have been withdrawn and expect a written answer.

Causeway Hospital: Maternity Services

1. **Mr McGimpsey** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he can give a commitment that there will not be a reduction in the provision of maternity services at the Causeway Hospital. (AQO 2398/11-15)

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I am aware of the concerns of the local community in the Causeway area in relation to access to key hospital services such as maternity care. I am advised that the Northern Trust has no plans to reduce maternity services in

Causeway Hospital. Indeed, from March 2012, the trust enhanced the maternity services in Causeway by providing the option of midwifery-led care for those women who are assessed as having a low-risk pregnancy.

I acknowledge that the Northern Trust area draft population plan does make reference to maternity services. It highlights the fact that, in the future, a review of maternity services provision will be required to identify the most appropriate configuration of services to meet the needs of the local population and to develop more choice for women. Such a review would be subject to local consultation. I want to ensure that every baby has the best possible start in life. That requires not just a focus on hospital services but a recognition that care starts at the pre-conception advice stage and continues through antenatal, intrapartum and postnatal care. A focus on the spectrum of maternity services is required if we are to improve outcomes for the mother, baby and partner.

Mr McGimpsey: I thank the Minister for his answer, which appears to confirm that there will be no reduction in the provision of the maternity service in Causeway Hospital as an acute service. There are other acute services there, such as inpatient medical and surgical services, urology, diagnostics and 24/7 A&E, as well as obstetrics and gynaecology. Can the Minister confirm to the House that there is no question of there being a reduction in those services?

Mr Poots: The Member is aware of the 'Transforming Your Care' report and he is aware that we have received the population plans and are about to commence a consultation process. I think that it would be inappropriate to give out what the intentions are within that consultation process before it is actually made public.

Ms S Ramsey: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answers thus far, and I take on board the issue of local trusts going out to local consultation on the issues. On the issue of the regional maternity hospital, will the Minister use this opportunity to give us an update on where we are actually sitting on the new regional site?

Mr Poots: There is nothing new to add to what has previously been the case. The commitments have been made for the development of that particular site. The timescales have been identified in that previous commitment, and nothing has come to me subsequently to indicate that that has been changed at all at this point.

Mr Storey: I am delighted to see that Members from South Belfast can take a keen interest in what happens in the Causeway Hospital. I hope that their local representatives take the same interest and attend all of the meetings that are scheduled when discussions are being held in regard to the future of the hospital.

The Minister referred to what he called "appropriate configuration". Does he have a view on whether it would also be an appropriate configuration for the Causeway Hospital to consider collaboration with Altnagelvin as opposed to what seems to be the case — always this persistent head towards Antrim? For some of my constituents, that might be more beneficial.

Mr Poots: The important thing is that we deliver what works. We always need to recognise that a considerable population lives in the Causeway area for 365 days a year, and that population is enhanced considerably during the summer. We always have to give due consideration to what works best. If the Member is indicating that he does not think that the linkage with Antrim works as well as it should, we are prepared to look at and consider that.

Mr McDevitt: I will keep up the South Belfast interest in this issue. I welcome the Minister's attempt to clarify the situation around maternity services. Does he agree that there is an inevitable degree of uncertainty and confusion in the community as a result of Transforming Your Care, the population plans and whatnot? Can he give the House a guarantee that he will move to eliminate as much uncertainty as possible and to put in place a very clear framework for the future of health service provision in this region as soon as possible?

Mr Poots: The proposals for the population plans were printed in late June 2012, and we are moving to the point of having them checked and put out for full consultation. Once full consultation is completed, which will hopefully be in early January, we can proceed with making the decisions. The health service is always fluid; there are always changes. Transforming Your Care should, perhaps,

give us a much more focused change than has been the case heretofore, but a lot of people did not predict the closure of the emergency services at the Mid-Ulster Hospital, for example. A lot of people did not predict the closures that happened at Whiteabbey Hospital, but they happened in the previous term. That was not planned, and there was no early notification or anything else. At least with Transforming Your Care, we are engaging with the public. I want that to be a very powerful engagement and for the public voice to be heard so that we get the right solutions to the healthcare needs of our population.

Accident and Emergency: Nurses

2. **Ms Boyle** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the proposal to upskill nurses to allow them to discharge patients following the recent problems with accident and emergency departments. (AQO 2399/11-15)

Mr Poots: In my announcement in March this year about tackling emergency department waiting times, I said that improvement could only be achieved through a broad approach involving all areas of the health service. I listed a range of areas to be explored. These included allowing senior nurses to discharge patients over weekends and public holidays, and exploring options to deal with patients who turn up inappropriately at emergency departments, by, for example, having triage nurses discharge individuals.

Nurse-led or nurse-facilitated discharge by skilled and experienced nursing staff is and has been in place in many of our hospitals for some time. Nurse-led or nurse-facilitated discharge is one part of the process that could improve the patient journey and make a substantial contribution to the efficient management of patients' stays and timely discharge. Health and social care trusts have been working with the multidisciplinary teams at ward level to improve this process, which includes training, support and reviewing local policies and procedures.

Ms Boyle: I thank the Minister for his answer. Some nurses may not feel comfortable doing that. Will nurses need to be regraded as part of this retraining and reskilling?

Mr Poots: That is a matter for the trusts to deal with. It is important that the trusts have nurses with the necessary skills to take on that responsibility. I am sure that discussions will be had between the trusts and the nurses' representative bodies to ensure that they are appropriately paid for the responsible job that they carry out.

Mr P Ramsey: I thank the Minister for his response. Will the Minister assure the House that there are sufficient beds and staff in accident and emergency departments to cater for any potential winter outbreaks?

Mr Poots: One problem that accident and emergency departments can have is the entire hospital being full. We could have a situation where, on one hand, we want our hospitals operating as efficiently as possible; therefore, we do not want lots of empty beds in a hospital on a regular basis. On the other hand, if we have a significant flu outbreak or increase in ill health over a period, that would put incredible pressure on our hospitals. I want to ensure that our hospitals can operate as efficiently as possible. We have introduced a series of steps whereby we can have faster, better discharges from hospital, and that certainly is one of the things that can help us. Pharmacy is another area where we can do more. So, there are areas in hospitals where we can improve efficiencies.

Mr Gardiner: Minister, how much time is set aside for the task of discharge — planning the work programme of discharge, whether by a doctor or nurse?

Mr Poots: Obviously, we have more nurses than consultants on the wards, so it would make sense to have nurses discharging, where it is safe and appropriate to do so. That is because the task of discharge can be time-consuming on occasions, particularly when it involves social services and other bodies, which can lead to further delays. All of that takes time, and it is appropriate to use the right people to deliver for us.

Royal Victoria Hospital: Paediatric Congenital Cardiac Services

3. **Mr Buchanan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the future of paediatric congenital cardiac services at the Royal Victoria Hospital. (AQO 2400/11-15)

5. **Mr Boylan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety to outline his plans for paediatric cardiac care following the recent report by the Health and Social Care Board. (AQO 2402/11-15)

10. **Mr Eastwood** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety what guarantees he can give that paediatric congenital cardiac services will be maintained at the Royal Victoria Hospital. (AQO 2407/11-15)

12. **Dr McDonnell** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety, in addition to discussions on the retention of paediatric congenital cardiac services at the Royal Victoria Hospital, to outline what discussions he has had with Minister James Reilly about cross-border co-operation in the provision of this service. (AQO 2409/11-15)

Mr Poots: Mr Speaker, with your permission, I propose to take questions 3, 5, 10 and 12 together, as they all relate to the same subject. I also refer Members to my written statement on 1 August, in which I give an assurance that I will not be making any decision on the future of paediatric congenital cardiac services (PCCS) until I am satisfied that there has been a full, open and transparent consultation and that all options for future delivery of PCCS have been robustly considered.

My overriding concern must be, and is, to ensure that the service that we provide is safe and sustainable. The review panel did not find any immediate safety concerns, and that is good news, but it did note that the paediatric congenital cardiac surgery service in Belfast is not sustainable and that potential risks should be addressed within six months.

I have asked the Health and Social Care Board, working with the Public Health Agency (PHA), to develop proposed criteria to provide a clear, objective basis for future decisions on PCCS and related services, and to draw up a commissioning specification for the delivery of the service in Northern Ireland. This work is being taken forward by a working group, which I asked the board and PHA to establish. That group includes patient representatives, parents and clinicians in its membership. There will be a full, open and transparent consultation on the criterion service specification and potential impact on service models. I expect the consultation to begin in October 2012. The consultation responses will help to inform the way forward in identifying the preferred service model for children from Northern Ireland who need specialist cardiac care, and I hope to be in a position to announce my decision early in 2013.

PCCS is a regular item for discussion at North/South Ministerial Council meetings, and, most recently, on 18 July, I met the Minister for Health for the Republic of Ireland, Dr James Reilly, and discussed our mutual wish to fully explore the potential for services on an all-island basis. Officials from both jurisdictions have been engaged in discussions on this matter, and the Republic will have every opportunity to demonstrate potential to deliver this service.

Mr Buchanan: I thank the Minister for his response, but can he assure the House that the parent group representatives will get to play a full role on the working group that he has established and that their voice and concerns will be heard?

Mr Poots: As I indicated, I have asked the Health and Social Care Board, with the Public Health Agency, to do just that and to ensure that parents are represented on that board — and not just represented on the board but have their voices heard. For many people, the quality of care is, of course, the number one priority, but often families have other children. Families must try to work and retain some income during the child's illness, and all of these things can be huge stresses, particularly if they have to go to England to get treatment. So, in all these things, we will give due consideration to these issues and to the concerns that parents raise.

2.45 pm

Mr Boylan: Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Minister for his answer. He clearly indicated that he had some discussions with the Minister of Health in Dublin. Will he outline those discussions, and will he agree that we should be developing an all-island approach in this matter?

Mr Poots: There are a number of issues, including capacity. The facility in Dublin is not the best in the world as things currently stand. However, they are committed to building a new hospital, which has been agreed through their Cabinet, by 2016. There are other issues too. For example, although we have no questions about the quality of work, the recording is not up to the standards adopted in the UK. However, we are anticipating receiving records for the past three years in the not-too-distant future.

It is incumbent on me to be very frank with the House. I do not want a second-class service for parents and children in Northern Ireland. I want a local service. These are the conundrums with which we are grappling. I do not have the answers as to whether I can deliver this service without going to the one in England. However, we are going to do our best to ensure that that is the case. We want to work closely with the Republic of Ireland, because that gives us close to the requisite number of children that will require a surgical team to be in place. I think that that is the outcome many parents are looking for.

Dr McDonnell: I thank the Minister for his honesty and frankness on this matter. This is indeed something that hurts, worries, and frightens the people, the families and the parents, involved. It is a very sensitive issue.

I have met, and I ask the Minister to meet, the Heartbeat Trust, which is the parents' organisation. Its deep concern is that when a child is seriously ill and is at death's door, it is very difficult to put that child on a plane and difficult for parents to get organised, particularly women who are just a few hours after coming out of labour. We should see no politics —

Mr Speaker: I encourage the Member to come to his question.

Dr McDonnell: I urge the Minister to see no politics or constitutional issues in this matter. It is a question of getting a service. I know that he will take that approach. These people are desperate, with children whose lives are threatened, and this is the one circumstance in which co-operation on healthcare across the border could be very useful.

Mr Poots: I fully understand the concerns of the parents, whether it is about travelling to Dublin or to Great Britain, especially if there are other children in the family. At this stage, of the 140 operations that take place, around 90 take place in Belfast and about 50 already take place elsewhere. Many of those cases involve the sickest children, who travel to Birmingham at the moment. The evidence indicates that we are achieving very good outcomes as a consequence.

Clinically, the arguments for going to Birmingham stack up at this stage. However, this is not just a clinical decision, and I want some assurance that we can match the clinical outcomes in Birmingham and ensure that we have the service provided here. It is more likely that the service will be provided in Dublin, but, if possible, I would like to have something in Belfast as well. I do not know whether that is achievable at this point.

Mr Dickson: Thank you, Minister, for your answers so far. I declare an interest as the great-uncle of a baby who received life-saving surgery in the Royal Victoria Hospital a number of days after his birth. It was impossible for his mother, who had had a Caesarian section, to travel anywhere other than from the Ulster Hospital to the Royal Victoria Hospital. This House, and much more important than that, the parents and the community, demand from you the absolute assurance that you will do your best to ensure that Belfast and Dublin co-operate fully to deliver an appropriate service that is as good as or better than that in Birmingham.

Mr Poots: I give the Member that assurance.

Mr McCallister: Like other colleagues, I have been receiving huge concerns from the community about this issue.

Has the Minister given any consideration to the impact the reorganisation of health services in England will have on the number of people that we send to Birmingham?

Mr Poots: I am confident that, if we decided to take up the Birmingham option, it would be met. That is the clear recommendation from the review team. We cannot easily dismiss the expertise of the review team, and it would be foolish to do so out of hand. At the same time, however, we should explore every opportunity that is available to us to maintain a more localised service without dropping the standards that we would expect, and we expect the best. I know that I would go to the far end of the world if it meant getting the right service for my family, but where we can deliver that quality of service at a local level, we should seek to ensure that we do so.

Nursing and Midwifery Students

4. **Mr Dallat** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety whether he intends to reverse his proposal to reduce bursaries for nursing and midwifery students. (AQO 2401/11-15)

Mr Poots: I instructed my officials to carry out a review of HSC student bursaries earlier this year to work towards harmonising the level and type of health and social care student support provided by my Department. Following public consultation, I made a decision on the way forward, and I do not intend to reverse it. I have, however, directed my officials to continue to monitor the impact of the reduction. I will review my decision in light of any evidence received that indicates a difficulty in filling training places for nursing and midwifery courses. My Department will also continue to monitor the student profile in line with its commitment to widening participation in education and training.

Mr Dallat: I thank the Minister for his answer, which I take as positive. Will he assure us that there are no plans to slash bursaries for other medical or social care students during the lifetime of this Assembly?

Mr Poots: It was because of the existing differential between the nursing bursary and other bursaries that we looked at this issue and addressed it. We believed that there was an inequality. Bursaries are there to encourage people to come into certain professions, and the bursary for the nursing community has been hugely oversubscribed for a number of years. When those bursaries were set, there were no student fees, but now other students have to pay over £3,000 in fees, so we are in different circumstances. Nevertheless, I hope that this is now fixed for a time, and there is no indication that we will look at other bursaries at this point.

Mr Beggs: Is the Minister aware of the injustice felt by these students, in that they cannot work in the periods when they are on clinical placements, and that the conditions have been changed since they originally applied for the course?

Mr Poots: Actually, the matter was being looked at when I came into office. I said that we would not do it last year because it was too late. The consultation has taken place, and the review started in February 2012. I will look and see how many drop out. The fact that we are investing around £35,000 in training each nurse is an indication that we are committed to bringing quality nurses into the profession. We are prepared to make that investment, and I think that we have done the right thing in this instance.

Mr Speaker: Question 5 has been answered. Question 6 has been withdrawn.

Attendance Allowance

7. **Mr B McCrea** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for his assessment of the effectiveness of the attendance allowance in supporting older people with a disability. (AQO 2404/11-15)

Mr Poots: While attendance allowance can be paid to older people who have a disability, it is a matter for DSD to determine the effectiveness of allowances and benefits that are intended to support people with disabilities regardless of age. As with any incapacity allowance or benefit, attendance allowance can be used in conjunction with other benefits and services to help older people to maintain their independence and remain in their own home and community while it is safe to do so.

Mr B McCrea: That is fair enough, but I wonder whether the Minister thinks that the attendance allowance is actually effective. Perhaps he has a different idea about how he might use the money if it were at his disposal.

Mr Poots: Unlike any other part of the United Kingdom, we pay for the allowances and support that we give to elderly people to stay in their own home. In other regions of the United Kingdom, people have to pay for that themselves. If the Member is proposing and if it is Ulster Unionist Party's policy that we should start charging older people for care in their own home, I would be very interested to hear about it. Let us have a debate on that some day. At this stage, we have decided that we should seek to continue to provide that type of care for older people and to maintain them in their own home. I think that it is much more cost-effective and better for the individual to have them in their own home than to have them in a hospital or a nursing home.

DHSSPS: Capital Projects

8. **Mr Givan** asked the Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety for an update on the priority list for capital projects. (AQO 2405/11-15)

Mr Poots: DHSSPS has been allocated £962 million for the four-year period ending in March 2015 against an assessed need of £1.8 billion. Of that funding, £756 million relates to the remaining three years of the current Budget period. Key projects that are planned or under way include the Royal hospital critical care building; the Royal maternity unit; Gransha mental health crisis unit; Omagh local hospital; Antrim hospital A&E; Antrim hospital 24-bed unit; Ulster Hospital phase B; and the north-west radiotherapy unit. Also included are Old See House; Ballymena Health and Care Centre; Banbridge health and care centre; Belfast mental health inpatient unit; the Bluestone extension at Craigavon; Craigavon hospital theatres; and further redevelopment at Altnagelvin hospital. In addition, almost £100 million is provided annually for capital works to support and maintain the extensive HSC and public safety estate, equipment and vehicle fleet.

ISNI 3, which has recently been approved by the Executive for consideration, contains proposals for revenue-funded infrastructure in addition to existing capital provision. Any such investment will be subject to business case approval, demonstration of value for money and affordability. That may allow me to progress some currently unfunded projects more quickly.

Mr Givan: I acknowledge that the Minister has a difficult job, given the capital need and the resources that he has at his disposal. However, he will be aware of the ongoing development of a business case to develop the Lagan Valley Hospital site. Is the Minister able to provide an update on where we are with that business case?

Mr Poots: The SOC has already been approved, and the business case is being developed. We believe that, as set out in 'Transforming Your Care', health and care centres are part of the community provision that will greatly assist us in moving away from the reliance on hospital provision. As part of the business case, the trust will have to identify options that we will consider carefully. I expect that the business case will be completed and submitted to my Department for scrutiny in October. Lisburn and Newry have the two health and care clinics in respect of which we are looking at the possibility of investment from outside the Health and Social Care Board's current funds. We will seek to go to the market to get funding to develop those cases, should the finances stack up.

Mr McDevitt: Given that 'Transforming Your Care' identifies the need for quite significant investment in new integrated primary care facilities, can he take the opportunity to assure the House that he does not envisage that that investment will be delivered principally by the private sector?

Mr Poots: I read out what we have money for and what we are spending money on. If we are to deliver those primary care clinics, the funding to deliver them does not exist in the public purse as it stands, so we will go to the private sector. We will go to the market to look for that funding. The thought process behind that is that, if savings are achieved because we deliver more care in the community and primary sector and, therefore, use fewer hospital beds, an affordability will be created to develop the new facilities that are so badly needed. So, some thinking outside the box is being done to ensure that we have a quality health service in Northern Ireland, as opposed to just depending on the traditional methods.

Mr Speaker: That ends Question Time. I ask the House to take its ease until we move to the next item of business.

3.00 pm

Executive Committee Business

Tobacco Advertising and Promotion (Display of Prices) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012

Mr Poots (The Minister of Health, Social Services and Public Safety): I beg to move

That the draft Tobacco Advertising and Promotion (Display of Prices) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

I seek the Assembly's approval to introduce the aforementioned statutory rule. Subject to the Assembly's approval, the rule will regulate the display of tobacco price lists and price labels to coincide with the removal of tobacco displays. The main aim of the legislation is to enable retailers to let customers know which tobacco products are for sale and at what price, as retailers will no longer be allowed to display tobacco products openly. In addition, the regulations have been drafted in such a way as to prevent tobacco price lists from being exploited and turned into brand promotions.

Members will recall agreeing in March 2009 to the extension of certain tobacco-related provisions in the Westminster Health Act to Northern Ireland. Those provisions provided my Department with powers to lay four separate sets of regulations relating to the display of tobacco products in retail outlets and the sale of tobacco from vending machines. All four sets of draft regulations were the subject of a public consultation in the latter half of 2010, and a summary of the consultation responses was published on my Department's website on 23 August 2011. All consultation responses were carefully considered and helped to inform the final regulations.

The Protection from Tobacco (Sales from Vending Machines) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 were debated in the Assembly on 17 January and commenced from 1 March 2012. Two further sets of regulations on removing tobacco displays and on specialist tobacconists were laid on 20 June 2012 under the negative resolution procedure.

Today, I move the motion to approve the Tobacco Advertising and Promotion (Display of Prices) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012. The regulations set out the size, appearance and number of price lists and price labels that retailers are permitted to use to allow them to inform customers about the tobacco products that are available for sale. Although Members may be concerned that the regulations are too prescriptive, I wish to clarify that they have been designed in such a way as to prevent them being exploited by the tobacco industry for the purposes of advertising or promotion.

The regulations specify that retailers are permitted to display prices of tobacco products in three ways. The first is by using poster-style lists up to A3 in size, which can be permanently on show. The second is through a list, including pictures of products, which must not be left on permanent show but can be shown to any customer aged 18 or over who asks for information about the tobacco products sold. The final way is through price labels, which can be placed on shelving, storage units or tobacco jars. The regulations will bring Northern Ireland into line with the rest of the UK, where similar regulations have either already been commenced or are due to be introduced in the near future.

The ultimate aim of introducing the new tobacco control legislation is to prevent young people from taking up smoking. Members will be aware that smoking remains the greatest cause of premature death and avoidable illnesses in Northern Ireland, killing around 2,300 people each year. The burden of smoking-related death is spread unequally across society, impacting more severely on those who face socio-economic deprivation. As well as being a major risk factor for coronary heart disease, strokes, cancer and other diseases of the circulatory system, smoking is a major cause of health inequalities. I find it unacceptable that, in the 21st century and with all we know about the dangers of tobacco use, a person living in one of the most deprived areas of Northern Ireland is twice as likely to die from smoke-related lung cancer as someone who lives in the least deprived area. While we will never, we hope, see a return to the very high smoking prevalence rates witnessed in the 1950s, when smoking was viewed as an aspirational activity, our current adult prevalence rate of 24% is unacceptable, particularly when we compare it with rates in other developed countries such as Canada and Australia. In spite of comprehensive health promotion programmes carried out by the statutory and voluntary sectors alike and existing restrictions on promotion and advertising, the tobacco industry manages every year to recruit large numbers of young people into smoking. I say "young people" because the vast majority of new smokers take up the habit while still in their teens,

most before they are even old enough to purchase cigarettes legally. The 2010 young persons behaviour and attitudes survey revealed that 8% of 11- to 16-year-olds in Northern Ireland are smokers. It is clear that further action is required. While I am not claiming that my Department's new tobacco control regulations will solve the problem of youth smoking, I believe that putting tobacco products and branding out of sight will help to put it out of mind for a number of young people.

In brief, the new regulations will ensure that the brightly lit gantries displaying row upon row of tobacco products are a thing of the past; set out clearly what is permitted in terms of the pricing of tobacco products to prevent price lists being used to promote various tobacco brands; and offer workable solutions for different types of businesses, including specialist tobacconists and duty-free shops. By introducing the new tobacco control regulations from 31 October this year for large shops, we will remove a source of tobacco promotion not only from thousands of underage children but from the huge numbers of smokers who try to quit each year. The addictive nature of tobacco is not in doubt. Last year, over 34,000 set a quit date with smoking cessation services, and that does not take into account the many thousands who will have tried to quit smoking without professional help. Stopping smoking is the most important health improvement decision that many people will ever make. Surely we can make it easier for them by saving them from constant exposure to the one thing that they are trying so hard to give up.

The new regulations will necessarily involve some change for retailers. Enforcement of the legislation will be the responsibility of the environmental health officers in local councils, who will do all they can to ensure that businesses are fully aware of what they must do to comply with the new regulations. Out of consideration for smaller businesses in these constrained economic times, they will not be expected to comply with the tobacco display and display of prices regulations until 6 April 2015, in line with England and Wales. As I have stated, the regulations will, however, commence for large businesses from 31 October 2012. As similar legislation has been in place in England from April this year for many of the multinationals, adaptations in Northern Ireland will be straightforward. The display of prices regulations strike the correct balance between protecting public health and offering a workable solution for businesses. I commend the motion to Members.

Ms S Ramsey (The Chairperson of the Committee for Health, Social Services and Public Safety): Go raibh maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. The Minister has explained the purpose of the statutory rule, and I do not need to go into it in detail. He said that it will allow retailers to display the price lists for customers and ensure that they are not exploited as advertisement. The Committee is content with the legislation and believes that it strikes the right balance. We considered the draft rule on 4 July and recommend that it be affirmed by the Assembly. On behalf of the Committee, I am happy to announce that we support the motion.

Mr Speaker: I call Jim Wells. I hardly knew the Member with his hair cut.

Mr Wells: That has thrown me completely, Mr Speaker.

I enthusiastically support the Minister's decision on this issue, and I want to recount the story of two personal friends, both of whom died from lung cancer: one lady who worked with my wife in education and another lady who worked in local government. Both were heavy smokers, and both started smoking as teenage girls at a time when smoking was seen as a very glamorous and exciting thing to do. Both bitterly regretted the day and hour they ever touched a cigarette and spent most of their life trying to give up smoking. Both died horrible, lingering and torturously painful deaths. No one in Northern Ireland deserves to go through the pain and agony that both those women went through long before their time.

This legislation is part of a suite of regulations and rules that are quite rightly being brought in by the Minister to try to discourage young people from taking up the awful scourge of smoking.

We have already seen some very successful initiatives. We have seen the ban on smoking in restaurants and pubs. Is there anybody out there today who does not believe that that was a good thing? At the time, I remember that we agonised in the Chamber about the introduction of that legislation. When I turned on — as I very seldom do — to RTÉ one night — not that usual, I have to say — and I saw —

Ms S Ramsey: Do you have it on your TV?

Mr Wells: No, I do not have it on my TV; it was on somebody else's TV. *[Laughter.]* When I saw a programme in which a spit-and-sawdust pub in the west of County Mayo successfully implemented a ban on cigarette smoking, I thought that if it can be done there, it can certainly be done in Northern Ireland. I am glad that the Assembly had the courage to back direct rule Ministers at that time and introduce the ban, which undoubtedly has helped enormously.

Then we had the ban on the display of tobacco in vending machines, which was introduced in March 2012. In response to questions from me, the Minister indicated that there seems to have been a universal observance of those regulations. There does not seem to be any pub, restaurant or shop that has tried to circumvent the legislation by continuing to sell tobacco products through vending machines. That was so important, because it was proved conclusively that vending machines were being used by young people to get access to tobacco long before they were old enough to make that decision. Therefore, that is a thing of the past; it has been settled and there has been no difficulty, despite the few people out there who said that it would cause doom and gloom and economic destruction for those concerned. That has not happened.

We have seen the Minister introduce the legislation on sunbeds, which has prevented those who are under 18 from using those particular devices, which can cause such a prevalence of skin cancer.

Mr McCallister: I think that it was his predecessor.

Mr Wells: No, it was this Minister who confirmed the regulations and introduced them. It was this Minister who had the courage of his convictions to carry forward that work and go ahead and outlaw the use of sunbeds for young people. As a result, we expect to see a significant reduction in melanoma — skin cancers — a horrible condition that can lead to an extraordinarily painful death.

We have now moved on to these regulations. I have been lobbied — not to any great extent, I have to say — by the tobacco industry, which said that this will cost a considerable amount of money. It has been well signposted for many years that this was coming. Therefore, the sector has had time to adjust, particularly the big multinationals. The supermarkets of this world have had time to adjust to the changes. Not only have they had warning from the Executive and this Minister, they have seen the example in the rest of the United Kingdom and in many other countries that have had to grasp the nettle and realise that the days of going into a shop, standing at the counter and seeing massive levels of in-your-face advertising, which tried to portray the message that tobacco was glamorous and exciting and that you were one of the lads if you smoked tobacco when, frankly, you were making a terrible mistake if you ever touched the stuff, is a thing of the past. That will no longer be the case for the big supermarkets and large shops.

The Minister has been balanced in the sense that he has given warning to the smaller retailers — the corner-shop tobacconists and newsagents — that it is coming their way as well and they will have to adjust. They have been given time to make that adjustment and go down the same route as many other parts of Europe and, of course, our own United Kingdom. Therefore, it is a balanced approach.

Ultimately, we must, as a society, provide support to the 81% of tobacco users who want to give up. The legislation is not antismoker; it is antismoking. It is trying to discourage people from taking up the habit and give help and assistance to the huge number of people who want to stop.

Mr McCallister: Will the Member give way?

Mr Wells: I certainly will.

Mr McCallister: I am getting great support here from my colleague. I encourage the Member to continue to support me in making sure that this Minister brings legislation to ban smoking in cars carrying young children or, indeed, ban smoking in cars, full stop. Not only are there health implications for children; that is where they see and may be encouraged to take up the disgusting habit, as he rightly called it.

3.15 pm

Mr Wells: Yes, indeed. The Member will recall that, against my better nature, I was an enthusiastic supporter of his private Member's motion on that very subject. I have no doubt that that will be used

against me in the 'Mourne Observer' at a later stage. Even though it was he who proposed it, I still thought it a very good idea and was very keen that the Minister consider it. As he knows, the Minister has a tobacco control strategy out, and one suggestion is that we move to the situation where smoking is banned in cars with young people. I think that we should go further. Maybe we should consider having no smoking in cars full stop, because, inevitably, people who are non-smokers will use those vehicles. We already have the precedent; in vehicles used by window cleaners, building contractors and so on, it is not legal to smoke, because those vehicles are used for commercial purposes. Maybe we need to move on that.

Mr Givan: I appreciate the Member giving way. I just want to reinforce the point that he makes about banning smoking in vehicles full stop. I recently purchased a second-hand vehicle. The previous owner, whom I do not know, was obviously a very heavy smoker. It has taken a considerable number of months to try to get the smell out of that vehicle. It is still there. I have a very mild form of asthma, usually related to sport activity. However, using the vehicle, at the start, did trigger the necessity for me to use my Ventolin inhaler, because of the impact from that vehicle having previously been owned by a smoker.

Mr Wells: It is points like that that may well mean that the rationale for banning smoking in all vehicles is overwhelming.

Can I tell an interesting story? I understand that I am not time limited. A few years ago, I travelled to Bulgaria, on Assembly business, on one of the few airlines in the world —

Ms S Ramsey: Aer Lingus.

Mr Wells: It was not Aer Lingus, I can assure you.

I travelled on one of the few airlines in the world that still allows smoking. That was a major shock to the system. I cannot recall ever in my life before travelling on a plane that allowed smoking. Not only did this airline allow smoking, but it sold the large, very long multipacks that you get on aircraft —

Mr McDevitt: Duty-free.

Mr Wells: Duty-free; that is right. I never frequent such places, but you know what I mean: the duty-free shops. They sold those on trolleys on the plane. If you purchased a multipack, you did not have to have your cigarette lighter on you. The stewardess produced a flamethrower and lit the cigarette for you on the plane. My thought was, "What is the life expectancy of a stewardess in that company?" The whole housing of the plane was brown or cream as a result of thousands and thousands of people, over the years, smoking on the plane. Yet I, as a non-smoker, had to walk into that situation and fly for four hours to Sofia. Of course, the first six rows were non-smoking; the rest of the plane was smoking. Frankly, it made absolutely no difference whether or not the first six rows were non-smoking. The reality was that, by the time we got to Sofia, it was just a cloud. The very fact that it is now so unimaginable that that would happen in Northern Ireland indicates how society has moved on and how we have readily accepted major controls over public behaviour in order to restrict smoking.

We need to move further. Just before the recess, there was a presentation in the Assembly by people from those parts of the world where they have banned the advertising of cigarette products on the packets. At the moment, the packets are still trying to present a glamorous image of cigarettes. In places like Nova Scotia and Australia, the packets are pure white, with the name of the company and the number of cigarettes included simply stamped on them. There is no bright-coloured, gold packaging; no red, white or blue, or whatever it is that is used to try to portray a glamorous image of cigarettes.

Mr Kennedy: Green.

Mr Wells: And some green, as well.

Should we in Northern Ireland be considering a ban on bright cigarette packaging with advertising? I think there is a very strong argument for that. I know that that is something that can be considered by the Assembly, albeit in conjunction with HMRC.

Ultimately, maybe we should consider going down the line of some district councils in England, which have banned smoking in children's play parks. How often do you see young children playing on the swings and the roundabout and the parents sitting there, smoking, for all the children to see? It has to be a realistic consideration that that be looked at. I can see all sorts of practical problems; I accept that. However, there are issues that we have to address.

At the end of the day, as the Minister said, and this is where it gets deadly serious, 2,300 people a year die in Northern Ireland as a direct result of the consumption of tobacco products. That is the population of somewhere like Moira and probably similar to the population of Comber. Some 2,300 people die every year. If 2,300 people were to die every year in Northern Ireland on our roads or as a result of farming accidents, there would be absolute uproar, but we allow 2,300 people to die very nasty, horrible deaths, and we need to take action to prevent that from happening.

One of the most telling things that happened to me during my time as Chair of the Health Committee happened when we went to see Paddy Johnston, who is one of the leading cancer surgeons, not only in Northern Ireland but in Europe. I am not going to reveal any names, but Mr McCallister was with us, and he is not one of the guilty parties. Some of us remember very clearly that Paddy produced jars full of formaldehyde. In those jars were the lungs of two people who had died from lung cancer and the lung from someone who had never smoked and who had died in a traffic accident. The lung from the traffic accident victim was pink; the lungs from the two lung cancer sufferers were black. What did two of our Committee do at the tea break? They went for a smoke. I am not saying that in any judgmental sense — I am not. I am saying it because the fact that anyone could sit through what Paddy Johnston told us that day and still go out to smoke gives some indication of the hold that tobacco products have on people. What made me particularly sad that day in the City Hospital was that when those members went out to smoke at the front of the hospital, who was standing there smoking but lung cancer sufferers in their nightgowns, with their little drips on trolleys. That is the grip that tobacco has on people's lives.

We have to give those people the support and incentive to give up the ghastly, horrible habit. By the way, Members, you may have detected that I am a non-smoker. We certainly need to give people the strength and support to give up, because if we do not, we will still have several thousands of people dying every year absolutely needlessly.

I have just sat through a presentation in the Long Gallery, which was organised by Cancer Research UK, and heard some pretty graphic stuff about what is going on. It is absolutely behind these regulations, and it has my total support. I hope that the Minister will be coming back several times more to introduce more regulations to make it as easy as possible for people to give up the dreaded tobacco.

Mr McCarthy: I fully support the regulations brought to the House this afternoon. In fact, I will support any proposal that will help to reduce deaths from cancers which come from the practice of smoking tobacco products. I would almost go to the point of banning the manufacture or import of tobacco products altogether, but that is a long way off.

I commend all our local organisations in Northern Ireland and throughout these islands for the excellent work in cancer research, cancer care and in dealing with the effects of this terrible disease. Every family has been hit at some time with a member falling victim to the disease. Unfortunately, as recently as about three months ago, I lost a young nephew, aged 46, to this horrible disease. What a loss. What a loss to his wife, young family and extended family. Unfortunately, that happens all too often, and anything the House can do to prevent such a loss must be supported.

I fully support our tobacco control strategy and commend everyone involved in its work. Hopefully, it will help to reduce tobacco use and, eventually, reduce the horrible deaths.

Research tells us that tobacco smoking remains the largest preventable cause of death. Think about it; it is preventable. We are told that some 2,300 Northern Irish people die from smoking each year. That is a staggering figure, and it should not happen. Keeping tobacco products away from our young people has to be paramount, and education of youngsters, at a very early age, about the deadly outcome of starting to smoke must always be to the forefront of our minds.

I am glad to acknowledge the reduction in the number of children smoking, due to the advertising ban some time ago, particularly at sports grounds, where children are very often to be found. Progress is being made and we are duty-bound to keep at it. The measure before us today goes further. It may

be a slow programme, but I am convinced that every little helps and, certainly, the Alliance Party fully supports the regulations brought today by the Health Minister.

Mr Poots: I thank the three Members who contributed to the debate. I take the fact that only three Members made contributions not as disinterest but as satisfaction that there is no opposition to this proposal and that people wish us to proceed with reducing the level of glamourisation of cigarettes all the time.

I remember the classical photographs of Marilyn Monroe holding a cigarette and looking absolutely stunning. For many years, that was the image that many young people had of smoking. Movie stars, sportspeople and pop stars all smoked, and it was something chic and classy to do. Now that image has largely been derided and most people know that it is a smelly, filthy habit. Smoking causes huge damage to people's lives, and kills one of every two people who participate in it.

I have many older friends who have smoked all their lives. They would have loved to have been able to give up smoking, but nicotine has such a grip on them that they cannot give it up, in spite of making many trial efforts to do so. Therefore, it is incumbent on us to take every step possible to ensure that people do not get caught in the habit of smoking, do not get addicted to nicotine in those early years and do not get the hankering to have another cigarette, even if they have given up for a period.

In all this, we are taking the right steps. I give Mr McCallister an assurance that we will consult on the issue of smoking in cars before the end of the year. I look at what is happening in other parts of the world. Some of it is draconian, and some could be accused of running a nanny state. Nonetheless, in Northern Ireland at this point, we are taking the appropriate steps and we need to constantly review this.

Mr Wells was very vociferous in what he said, so if you think I am bad, just wait to see what you get next. As he made clear, this measure is not meant to be anti-smoker. The 24% of our population who smoke are largely decent people who are caught in a particular habit. What we are about is anti-smoking. In a generation's time, we do not want there to be 24% of the population smoking. I trust that the steps that we take today, those that we have taken and, indeed, the steps that the former Minister took, and probably those which future Ministers will take, will help to ensure that that is the case.

*Question put and agreed to.
Resolved:*

That the draft Tobacco Advertising and Promotion (Display of Prices) Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2012 be approved.

*Motion made:
That the Assembly do now adjourn. — [Mr Speaker.]*

Adjournment

Flooding: East Belfast

Mr Speaker: The proposer of the topic will have 15 minutes, the Minister will have 10 minutes to respond and all other Members who are called to speak will have approximately seven minutes.

Mr Newton: Mr Speaker, I am grateful to you for being in the Chamber today. I also want to thank the Minister for Regional Development for being in attendance. I wrote to him and to the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development on the matter. The Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has responsibility for the Rivers Agency. I have to confess to being disappointed, in the sense that I wrote to her on 16 July.

3.30 pm

I got a letter back dated 8 August, which, at the most, arrived one or two days later. The letter indicated that she was not available to accept my invitation to meet flood victims, who were essentially my constituents, and, indeed, that her officers would be in contact with me shortly to discuss a date for a suitable meeting. That letter was dated 8 August. As I stand here at the moment, I have not had any contact from the Rivers Agency, and I am still waiting to hear from her officials.

I deeply regret that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development is not available to be in attendance today. I believe that she has a major role to play in this issue, and I acknowledge that the Minister for Regional Development also has a role to play. For many, particularly, but not exclusively, in East Belfast, this is a very serious ongoing problem to which there is not perceived to be a solution.

Mr Speaker, you will remember that, only a few years ago, we were being told that the first major flooding was a once-in-100-years experience. It is not, particularly not in East Belfast. With every downpour, there is concern that we are in for another bout of flooding. In fact, on 27 June, 720 homes in the Belfast boundary were granted the £1,000 emergency payment. That £1,000 in no way compensates the flood victim. There were 329 victims in the Castlereagh area of the borough of Castlereagh, which is in the East Belfast constituency. Therefore, 1,049 people in that constituency were flooded out of their homes, and, for many of them, it was not the first time. In fact, I understand that one lady cannot get insurance for her home now because it has been flooded five times. I do not mean that a drop of water came in through the front door; I mean that her house was flooded from the front door out through the back door.

Following the Executive's announcement on 5 July, there was some anticipation regarding the acceleration of projects. There was an expectation from many of those flood victims that additional money would be made available for flood alleviation schemes. I understand that, particularly for the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD), the cost of flood alleviation works in East Belfast amounts to around £11 million. I further understand that the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development has had discussions regarding the prioritisation of her budget for flood alleviation works. However, my constituents and I need to know what priority she is attaching to the necessary capital funding. They need to know what level of priority is being attached to delivering to them a solution to their problem. We need to know how often the Minister has met the Finance Minister on the matter and what priority she is giving to East Belfast residents for what is virtually a crisis. I understand that she has confirmed the reprioritisation of her budget to deal with the flooding problems to the Finance Minister, but my constituents have no information on the matter.

Just a few days ago, it was announced that we are going to build a new DARD headquarters up in Londonderry. Mr Speaker, I am sure that you will not be opposed to that, and I understand that, from your perspective, you want to see additional financial capital projects in the north-west. DARD's capital budget is somewhere in the region of £23 million for 2013-14 and around £30 million for 2014-15, which is not an insignificant amount. My constituents view that as sufficient to deal with their nightmare of problems, with plenty left over. They just do not understand how the Rivers Agency has lost out on funding, how increases in funding to the rural development fund have taken place and why DARD is prioritising a new capital build project for its HQ in the north-west — all while senior citizens, sick children and disabled people are being flooded. To them, that shows a very low level of concern about the problem. In fact, one lady described it to me as bizarre prioritisation. Is that what people should expect from a devolved Assembly that was established to take up their concerns? In the minds

of some people, it is more important to have posh offices for officers of DARD than it is to invest in flood alleviation schemes.

Mr McDevitt: I appreciate Mr Newton giving way, as I will not be able to stay for very long. I echo his sentiments from a perspective across the constituency boundary in South Belfast. There are very many people — Mr McGimpsey, who is in the Chamber, will know this — in the Finaghy area, particularly the Orchardville area, who will wonder why the Rivers Agency cannot take seriously some of the very significant structural issues and why it cannot come forward with proper investment programmes and proper management plans to turn what is effectively an informal river system into a well-managed watercourse. That is an area to which the House needs to turn its attention.

I acknowledge the efforts made by the Minister for Regional Development at the height of the floods. I want to thank him for paying a visit to the constituency and showing some personal interest, but we need the Minister of Agriculture and Rural Development to take the same level of interest.

Mr Newton: I thank the Member for his intervention. He agrees with me about the prioritisation of the budget, and I echo what my constituent said: it is bizarre.

There is, of course, a project in East Belfast — this will not impact on the Member's constituency — called the Connswater greenway project, which includes a proposed flood alleviation scheme. Unfortunately, there were contractual disputes, and the contract was halted. We are out to tender again, and I hope that the Minister will ensure that the Rivers Agency has the finance in place and is prepared and ready to go as soon as the new contract is in place. As I said, I welcome the fact that Minister Kennedy is here.

Many areas across the constituencies have been flooded, and that is very much due to the historical fact that we have a drainage system that handles water and sewage in the same pipes and is no longer capable of handling the torrential downpours that we have been experiencing. There is a strong belief — I have seen this with my own eyes and do not understand it — that a simple thing like cleaning gratings and gullies, which I understand used to happen twice yearly, now happens once a year at most. I am sure that the Minister will confirm that. I know that when a lorry arrived to clean the drains at the 14-storey block of flats in Clarawood, which was one of the areas flooded, it could not get to them because the drains were in the car park, with cars or lorries parked on top of them, and there was no way that the guy could have found out who owned the cars. That is just an example of bad siting.

The old joint water and sewerage system is well past being able to handle today's problems. An investment is required, and that investment needs to be bid for. I regard that as additional investment. Minister, you know the flood areas in the east of the city. On the night of the most recent flooding on 27 June, I did not need to be told which areas had flooded. I went straight to them, because they have a history of flooding.

Areas that I visited immediately included Clonduff, which has frequent severe flooding, which has resulted in many householders being unable to get insurance.

There is a human side to this. In one of the flooded homes lives a family with a young severely disabled child, who lives in an extension to the home. They were forced out of their home for weeks. The child needs specialist medical care. That should not happen in the 21st century. Elderly residents, unable to handle the trauma of being flooded and flooded again; disabled residents completely flooded out of their homes; children moved to the care of other family members; and, so often, just a feeling of despair among those who have suffered this. In the Larkfield area of Sydenham, residents were up to their knees, not just in water, but in water and sewage flowing into their homes. The same applies to houses in Orangefield Park. In fact, there is a meeting taking place at this moment between the Lord Mayor of Belfast and the residents of Orangefield Park. Clarawood, Cregagh and many other areas were affected — this should not be happening in this century.

The flooding has occurred. Emergency responses are taking place. We need to learn some things from this. Even some simple messages need to be learned. A couple of weeks ago, I made the point in the press that Northern Ireland Water made some good profits. I am not opposed to its making good profits: I know that it is not all cash. However, we need to see where that money is going. I suspect that the Minister will make a bid for it. It should be invested in local infrastructure. Where there is frequent flooding, we need to give residents the ability to help themselves. In many cases, it

was too late before sandbags arrived with residents. Homes were already flooded. Homes that have a history of flooding deserve for us to provide some sort of what I describe as a "bespoke flood mechanism". These are not expensive. We need a corporate approach to it, whether it is in East Belfast or other parts of Northern Ireland.

I understand that the Rivers Agency, to its credit, has commissioned a report on the effectiveness of flood defence mechanisms. I look forward to the outcomes of that report, but residents need to see swift action when the forecasted rain occurs or when it happens in a flash flood-type situation. They do not need to rely on statutory bodies swinging into action, or otherwise, to protect their homes. Past experiences have not been good for them.

I welcome one small decision by Belfast City Council to locate stockpiles of sandbags close to those areas that are described as being most at threat. That is a welcome step. However, good communication lines with residents are of the utmost importance. It sounds simple that we communicate with those who are in danger of being flooded, but it does not work; it has not worked. The emergency procedures have not made it work. If residents knew that there was a communication system for them when an emergency happens, it would build confidence and trust among potential flood victims. On the night of 27 June, residents were directed to the emergency flooding line. The flood line was unable to handle the high volume of calls. On that night, Government bodies needed to communicate with residents.

Mr Speaker: Will the Member draw his remarks to a close?

Mr Newton: I will just make the point that communication is important, Mr Speaker.

Finally, I look forward to the conclusions on what the operational agencies are doing in their report on this latest emergency, following the standing down of the response plans. We have a lot to learn.

Mr Speaker: I call Fra McCann. The Member has approximately seven minutes in which to speak.

Mr F McCann: Go raibh míle maith agat, a Cheann Comhairle. I thank the Member for bringing this important issue to the Floor of the Assembly. I know that because he is from East Belfast, the Member is concentrating on his constituency, but it is a Belfast problem. Many areas of Belfast suffered equally in the flooding earlier in the year, but one thing that he rightly said was that it is not a newfangled thing; it has been going on for a number of years. In fact, I remember having a conversation some years ago in the St James's area and heard stories that when Belfast city centre used to flood, one mechanism used was that sluice gates were closed in local areas, which meant that local areas flooded to save the water from getting down into the city centre. Those areas still flood. As a matter of fact, in 2008, a new underpass was completely flooded and most of that came about because grilles in a local river that led to it were blocked. More checks need to be made of local rivers, grating systems and grilles to ensure that there are no blockages.

3.45 pm

The Member mentioned Belfast City Council. In my understanding, the Belfast City Council operation to deal with the situation kicked in quite quickly. In fact, the council needs to be commended. How do we ensure that other areas act as quickly? How do we ensure that there is one site that operates across not only the city but the North, where senior people from each of the agencies come together, sit down and plot out a course that allows them to deal effectively with what has become a nightmare for people who live in different areas of Belfast?

I heard comments from local people in the Twinbrook and Poleglass areas of Belfast. They said that when the rivers flooded, it was like a tsunami coming down at them, with the water running right down into their houses, and all that happened in a matter of minutes. Some precautionary tactics would probably have ensured that that did not take place.

My colleague Alex Maskey has been calling in his local bulletin for a lead person to be appointed by the Executive to ensure that all this is taken into consideration and that among the agencies that have a responsibility, whether for the local drains and grilles, the provision of sandbags or assistance after flooding, one person has responsibility. After the operation that took place in Belfast, could Belfast become the centre point of an operation that stretches right out to cover other areas?

We need to get our act together to ensure that this does not happen again. We need to pull people together, knock heads together and bring senior people together to ensure that they are not having conferences over the phone but are sitting face to face, talking about issues and how they could be dealt with.

Mr McGimpsey: I am grateful to Robin Newton for bringing this forward. This is, of course, an issue that has come to us as local representatives in Belfast on more than one occasion. The fact that it is recurrent is particularly intolerable for householders in our areas. I speak as somebody who represents South Belfast, which has had more than its share of flooding, but I am also aware of the problems in East Belfast and areas such as Lisburn.

The points have been made but I will run over them briefly. The first thing is communication. If you are in a house in south or east Belfast, and the house starts to flood, and because it is a shared system, it is not simply dirty water but sewage coming through the front door, you need to be able to talk to the appropriate authorities. So, the first thing is communication, the central telephone hotline, and it is important that when you ring it up, somebody answers. You do not want to ring it up and discover it is engaged or you are made to wait. Communication is the very first thing that people expect and require.

The second thing that has to happen is immediate and quick action. There is a lack of co-ordination and that has been apparent with the various bodies, whether it is the Water Service, Roads Service, the Rivers Agency, and so on. You need to have a central authority responsible, certainly in Belfast. To me, the obvious and most effective authority, certainly in Belfast, is, of course, Belfast City Council, which, through the City Hall, has people on the ground and the capacity to respond quickly to an emergency, providing it is given support from the Executive. It seems to me that that is the second step. So, people who need sandbags or even need to be rescued should have support available to them, and using City Hall seems to me to be one of the best ways to go forward.

The other thing when the problem is dealt with is the provision of some form of compensation. Compensation claims are being accepted by the Executive and moneys are available, but that does not begin to deal with the distress that householders feel. It seems to me that the cheapest and most economic compensation the Executive could offer is an investment in infrastructure. The reason why this is happening is, firstly, weather patterns, and the weather patterns over the past number of years have been peculiar to say the least. As I understand it, the best predictions are that this will continue. This will not be a one-off; we will continue to see these types of extreme weather patterns and deluges. Therefore, we need the infrastructure to cope. The other problem with the infrastructure, which cannot cope because the diameter of the pipes is not great enough, is, of course, that we have seen large amounts of development in the affected areas but that development has not been matched by infrastructure investment. We are, therefore, seeing a lack of capacity in the sewerage pipes. We also have an integrated single system, rather than the dual system that we probably should have.

The Water Service is aware of all that and knows what is required. It has the plans, and it can sort it out, but it requires the resources to make that investment. As I understand it, the sewerage scheme at Glenmachan Street would cost around £35 million and would alleviate the problems in the Lisburn Road/Finaghy area — and not just in that area. It seems to me that those are the sorts of investment moneys that need to be found by the Executive. Other sewerage schemes are also available around the Sydenham area. The point is that the Water Service has not been taken totally by surprise by this. Its planners understand what is happening, and it understands, with the amount of development that has happened, the calibre of pipes that are required. It has very advanced plans in place, and it seems that those plans and the investment and infrastructure could be delivered within a matter of a year or two to ensure that this does not happen again. As I said, this is one of the worst things that can happen to a household — an act of God, a deluge or a flood — and it keeps happening again and again. These are houses in good residential areas of Belfast — in South Belfast and East Belfast — that have proper roads and sewers, as the residents understand it. They are paying a proper rate to the local authority. They find it very unacceptable to say the least that this problem should be recurring.

We have a duty to those householders and to the public in general. If flooding is happening today in South Belfast, East Belfast or Lagmore in Lisburn, there are other areas throughout Northern Ireland that are equally vulnerable. We need to see those plans —

Mr F McCann: Will the Member give way?

Mr McGimpsey: Yes, indeed.

Mr F McCann: I have two points. First, I could not understand what you said about people in South Belfast and East Belfast paying a proper rate and where that fits in with people in North Belfast and West Belfast. Maybe you could clarify that. Secondly, do you not think that there should be a review of the phone system, and especially of the numbers that were given to elected representatives? When they phoned in, it was impossible to get through. There should be a review of that system.

Mr McGimpsey: Mr McCann, I referred to South Belfast and East Belfast, but East Belfast is what the Adjournment debate is about. I have gatecrashed the debate as I am a member for South Belfast, but, as I said, my comments apply equally to Lagmore in Lisburn, North Belfast and all parts of Northern Ireland where people pay their rates and believe that they are entitled to have that type of support and protection.

The first thing that I referred to was communication. The most aggravating and frustrating thing when something like this happens is that you cannot get through to the appropriate authorities because the phones are engaged, the telephones are not manned and no one is answering at the other end of the line. Communication and the provision of telephone hotlines are some of the key things, but, after that, it has to be about communication that produces something, so that if you need the sandbags, you get the sandbags, and if you need some other sort of support, you get that. It seems to me that we all understand the problem and we all understand the remedy. It is about the Department delivering that remedy through investment in the Water Service, which has the plans and knows what needs to be done. Let us get on with it and do it.

Mrs Cochrane: I, too, welcome the opportunity to speak on such a vital issue, and I thank the honourable Member for securing this Adjournment debate. Many of the issues that I want to raise have already been mentioned, so I will try my best not to repeat them. I also thank the Minister for his attendance.

The flooding on 27 June affected many residents of East Belfast, many of whom had never experienced flooding in their properties before. That is an indication of the severity of the weather conditions that evening. However, unfortunately, I fear that we will experience more and more similar downpours in the future. That evening, when I saw the water levels in my own back garden, which does not normally flood, I knew that the rainfall was having a major impact on my constituents. I located my husband's wellies and out I went to try to see if I could be of assistance. Only a few streets away, in the Tullycarnet area, I was faced with residents who were knee-deep in water, desperately trying to unblock drains to let the water get away.

Mr Newton mentioned the cleaning of the gullies. I have asked Roads Service whether it has a plan of the areas that are more susceptible to flooding, so that when heavy rain is forecast, an extra clean can be carried out in those areas in addition to the annual cleaning schedule. I am awaiting a response on that.

I also found other residents trying desperately to get through to Floodline to get assistance. In an emergency such as that, people's primary concern is obtaining an urgent response. As others have said, it is simply unacceptable that they had to wait on hold for a considerable time before being told that, in fact, they needed to ring a different number. Constituents continually say that there is confusion between the different statutory bodies that deal with flooding and that better communication between the agencies is essential in times of emergency.

When the rain stopped, many householders were fortunate enough that the water had not got into their properties, although the levels were right up to their front doors. We asked whether some of those roads could be closed until the water had drained away, but, unfortunately, the PSNI refused to do that. It was extremely frustrating when cars drove down those streets, sending waves of water into houses that, until that point, had remained dry. That situation could so easily have been prevented.

Another preventative measure that could have been taken was to do with the distribution of sandbags in advance of homes being flooded. Many residents were again told that sandbags could only be provided once a home was flooded. Indeed, sandbags were given out in some areas where the flood levels were so high that the sandbags would provide no defence. In fact, if those sandbags had been

distributed to the areas where the flooding was not as severe, they could have at least prevented some homes from being flooded, instead of none.

Although sandbags have their limitations — for example, many elderly people are unable to move them — the issue of consistency in provision across council areas must also be addressed. Many constituents do not see their council boundary. Rather, they simply see someone in the next street being given sandbags and overnight assistance while they are not because of their address.

We also cannot deny the impact of development on the increasing incidence of flooding that we are seeing in urban areas such as east Belfast. Although I understand that the Planning Service does aim to consult with the relevant agencies where possible for larger developments, the fact that no single body is responsible for flooding and flood prevention can make matters more difficult. There was severe flooding on the Gilnahirk Road, much of it, seemingly, due to garden-grabbing developments that have impacted on river flow in the area. The cumulative impact of small developments, extensions, and even concreting and paving, also causes problems. Perhaps rate subsidies for more permeable surfaces, for example, could be one way of encouraging people to consider the impact of drainage in their area.

There was also confusion and some miscommunication about the flood payments in some areas. Some residents believed that they were not entitled to them, as they were only for those who did not have insurance. Although the £1,000 payments were welcome, and many constituents relied on them, I feel that I need to raise the matter of reactionary payments being made in contrast to substantial investment in our infrastructure. I understand that people are naturally frustrated with the authorities, and perhaps the last thing they would wish to consider is paying more, given the poor level of service, but we simply cannot continue to talk about how we should react better to, or contain, disasters each time a crisis occurs. Whether it was the big freeze and thaw of December 2010 or these floods, we must act now to reduce the risk of repetition and also to improve the information and crisis response services that were lacking in June.

4.00 pm

Mr Lyttle: I thank the Member who secured the Adjournment debate on this important issue. Like many Members from East Belfast, I spent the night of Wednesday 27 June up to my knees in water in homes, businesses and neighbourhoods across the area. I spent much of the summer, along with my colleagues, meeting representatives and residents who are concerned, and rightly irate, about the treatment that they received and the lack of investment from the Departments responsible for these services. We still have not got round everyone.

Some families had the ground floors of their homes destroyed and now face insurance chaos. I encountered older people confined to their beds in fear of losing their oxygen supply through losing their electricity supply. Businesses were devastated. I am grateful to the Minister for Regional Development for visiting the Bloomfield commercial centre. I welcome his attendance today, but I had hoped that a few other Ministers would have been here, given the cross-departmental responsibility for the issue.

Thousands of pounds' worth of damage was done to businesses, including signage companies, electronics firms and self-employed carpenters. People faced the choice of saving their business or their home, knowing that they faced the irreparable loss of one. There were, allegedly, failed pumping stations in East Belfast, and streets ran with water for lack of adequate drainage. Witnesses said that they saw the phenomenon of streets suddenly clearing as if plugs had been pulled, which suggests a strange drainage configuration in some areas. There was a failure to close roads quickly enough and redirect traffic, and buses were going down flooded side streets. There was a total failure to deal with the emergency as it unfolded.

Members also referenced the Floodline fiasco. It is my understanding that what was meant to be a one-stop shop for all flooding concerns had as few as two active call handlers at one point of the evening. That is totally unacceptable, although, unfortunately, it is not new. We have seen it before, as was mentioned, and urgent action needs to be taken. Thankfully, we have seen some interim responses. There are plans, and work is being done to see whether we can have localised emergency plans, whereby residents who want to help one other are given the resources to enable them to do so. Floodline needs to be sorted out, as was mentioned. We need adequate investment in our water and sewerage networks and adequate planning control. From that point of view, it is

disappointing that only the Regional Development Minister is here this evening, given the responsibilities of the Department of the Environment and the Rivers Agency.

In July, the Executive finally agreed, further to this fiasco, to fast-track £10 million for flood alleviation schemes, including the East Belfast scheme integrated in the Connswater Community Greenway project. This is to be welcomed wholeheartedly. However, even now, in September, the Minister of Finance gave a vague answer to my colleague Judith Cochrane's question in the Chamber today about how much of that money will go to East Belfast and when the Rivers Agency, Belfast City Council and the Connswater Community Greenway project will be allowed to get on with delivering the integrated East Belfast flood alleviation scheme. Answers to that have yet to come forward. The professionals on the ground who are eager and ready to deliver that scheme deserve those answers in a much more timely fashion than we have seen to date.

A cross-departmental response is required. I thank the Minister for Regional Development for his presence today and, in fairness, for his presence on the ground during the flooding that occurred. We hope to see a greater level of presence and action from his ministerial colleagues to ensure that the immediate action that residents and businesses in East Belfast now demand in a very forceful fashion is taken as soon as possible.

Mr Kennedy (The Minister for Regional Development): Thank you very much for the opportunity to respond to the debate. I thank Mr Newton for tabling the Adjournment topic and all Members for their contributions and attendance. I will seek to cover all the points and issues that Members raised. However, given the time restraints, my officials and I will study the Hansard report when it is published to pick up any additional or outstanding points.

I place on record and express my own sincere and genuine sympathy for those householders and businesses that suffered from the very real upset, inconvenience and, indeed, expense of flooding, not only in East Belfast but in other parts of Northern Ireland after extreme rainfall, particularly that in June. As some Members are aware, and as we heard and had confirmed, I spent some time at the emergency control room in Belfast City Council on the evening of 27 June talking to those who were involved in the emergency response. I thank Belfast City Council and its officials for the work that they undertook. Indeed, I thank my own officials in Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water for all the work that was done on the ground. As Members are aware, I went on site on 28 June to see for myself the impact in various parts of Belfast, such as Castlereagh and Cregagh in east Belfast, as well as parts of south and west Belfast. Since the events, I have met Members and several party delegations, and, through correspondence, I have been dealing with some of the issues that have been raised.

Members highlighted the hardship and difficulties that residents, particularly the vulnerable and the elderly, have faced. I assure the House and the public that I take this issue very seriously. I am responding to the debate on behalf of the Executive. Members will know that that is the manner in which business is conducted. However, I also want to say that I am keen to play my part in reducing the risk and impact of flooding. In early July, I presented a report on the flooding to Executive colleagues, seeking support from them for the measures that are necessary to begin to address the issue. I welcome the Executive decisions that were announced following our meeting, and when it reports, I look forward to considering the review's findings with colleagues.

As Minister for Regional Development, I am responsible for Roads Service and Northern Ireland Water. They clearly have very important roles to play in ensuring that our roads and sewerage networks continue to function when we experience heavy rainfall. It has been highlighted, and Members will be aware, that the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development is the statutory drainage and flood defence authority for Northern Ireland. The Department of Finance and Personnel hosts the flood incident line, and the Department of the Environment is responsible for local councils and planning, as well as for hardship payments. On the issue of hardship payments, Members will be interested to know that approximately £1.25 million has been provided for those householders who were affected by the flooding in June. I understand that that does not and cannot compensate for the distress or inconvenience that were caused. It is an acknowledgement of the matter on behalf of the Executive, but the underlying issue remains that there needs to be greater investment in our overall infrastructure.

As well as those government bodies, individual householders and landowners all have roles and responsibilities when it comes to flooding. As I said in the House on 2 July, addressing flooding

requires co-ordination. That is something that I expect the Executive-commissioned review, which the Department of Finance and Personnel is carrying out, to consider in detail.

There are, of course, many reasons why some areas are more likely than others to flood. Those include geology and historical patterns of development. Ultimately, the cause of flooding is easy to identify: it is more rainfall than our gullies, sewers and modified watercourses are designed to cope with. That is a crucial point, because our infrastructure in most areas performed to design. However, its design capacity was simply insufficient to cope with the volume of water passing through it.

Managing the risk of flooding in any area requires careful consideration and planning. Regrettably, even if we had far more resources than we have now, we could not eliminate the risk of flooding completely. Leaving aside the unpredictable weather and drainage issues, infrastructure can only be built to deal with a determinant volume of liquid. Periodic inspections of culverts and gullies are not fail-safe, and there are limits to planning controls, and so on. Nonetheless, that should not prevent us from putting in place a long-term strategy to improve the current situation and to better prepare for a future in which we may well see more frequent extreme weather events.

I have already touched on the need to improve co-ordination between government bodies. I have heard that message here today and agree with it. I expect the Executive's review to report shortly, after which we will decide collectively as an Executive, across the relevant Departments, how best to proceed. At a time when there is significantly less money to spend on public services, I believe that investment in our water and sewerage system represents value for money, and it will be something that I will continue to press for at Executive level. I will argue the case in the Executive for the prioritisation of flood defence and alleviation measures. Primarily, of course, it is the responsibility of the Rivers Agency. I will also ensure, given the proposer of the debate's remarks, that I address those issues directly with Minister O'Neill. I will also make the case for additional resources for Northern Ireland Water for capital investment in infrastructure.

I have seen at first hand the devastation that flooding causes. I would not want it in my house and I would not want it visited on any other house or family. Therefore, I am firmly committed to ensuring that preventing internal household flooding remains a priority in investment plans and for the Executive themselves.

I will address very quickly some of the points raised. Communication is key. The failure of Floodline in the evening at the end of June was a contributory factor. We have a system whereby gullies are inspected and cleaned regularly. That will continue. There are issues that we need to continue to address. However, most specifically, we need further investment in our overall infrastructure. That is the solution to the issue. That is the outcome that I want to see, as Minister for Regional Development, along with the shared responsibilities that I and others around the Executive table have. I will continue to work for, and to, that end.

Adjourned at 4.14 pm.